

THE Reincarnated Princess Spends Another Day SKIPPING STORY ROUTES



Story by Bisu
Illustrations by Yukiko

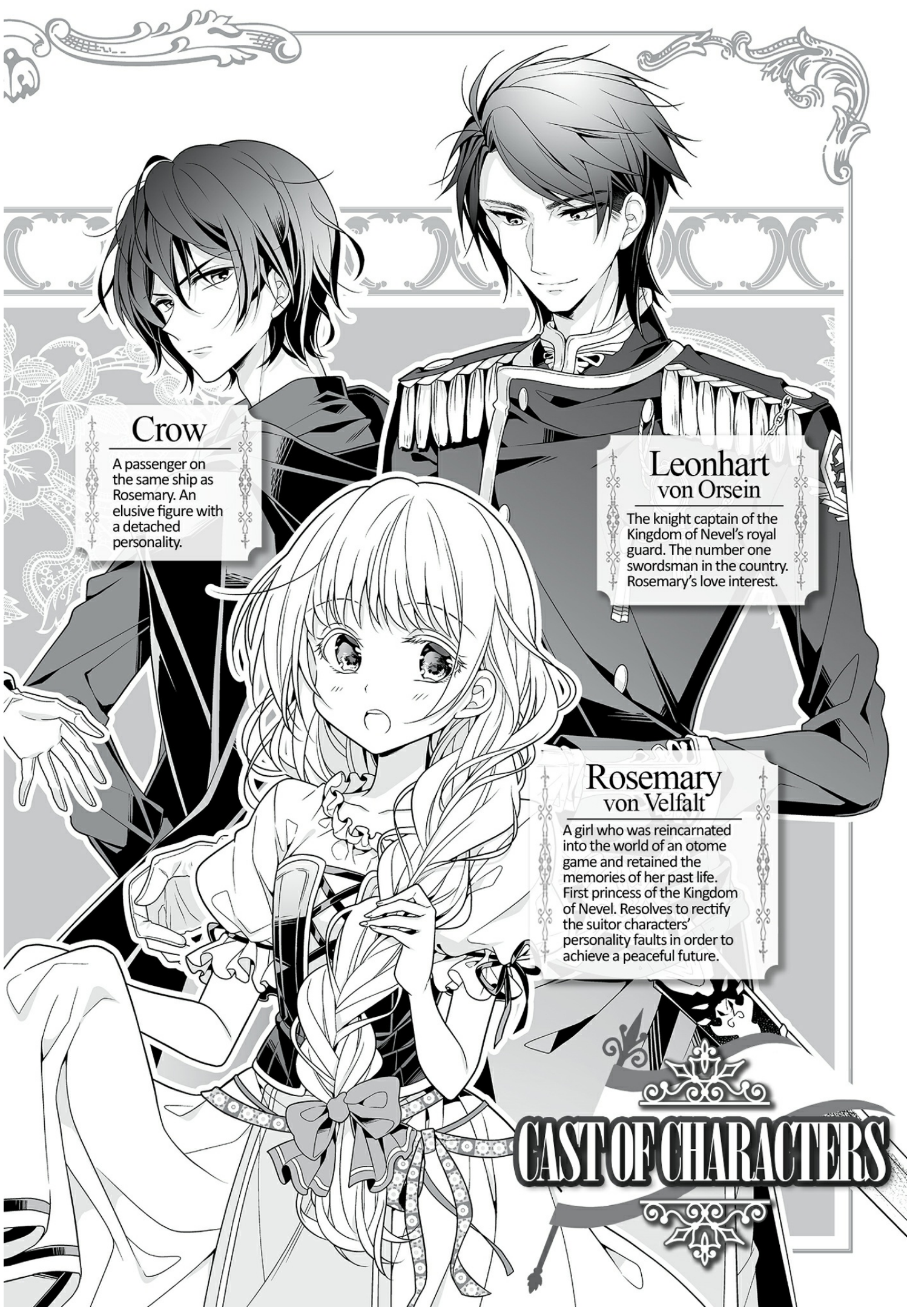
4



THE
Reincarnated Princess
Spends Another Day
SKIPPING STORY ROUTES

Story by Bisu
Illustrations by Yukiko

4



Crow

A passenger on the same ship as Rosemary. An elusive figure with a detached personality.

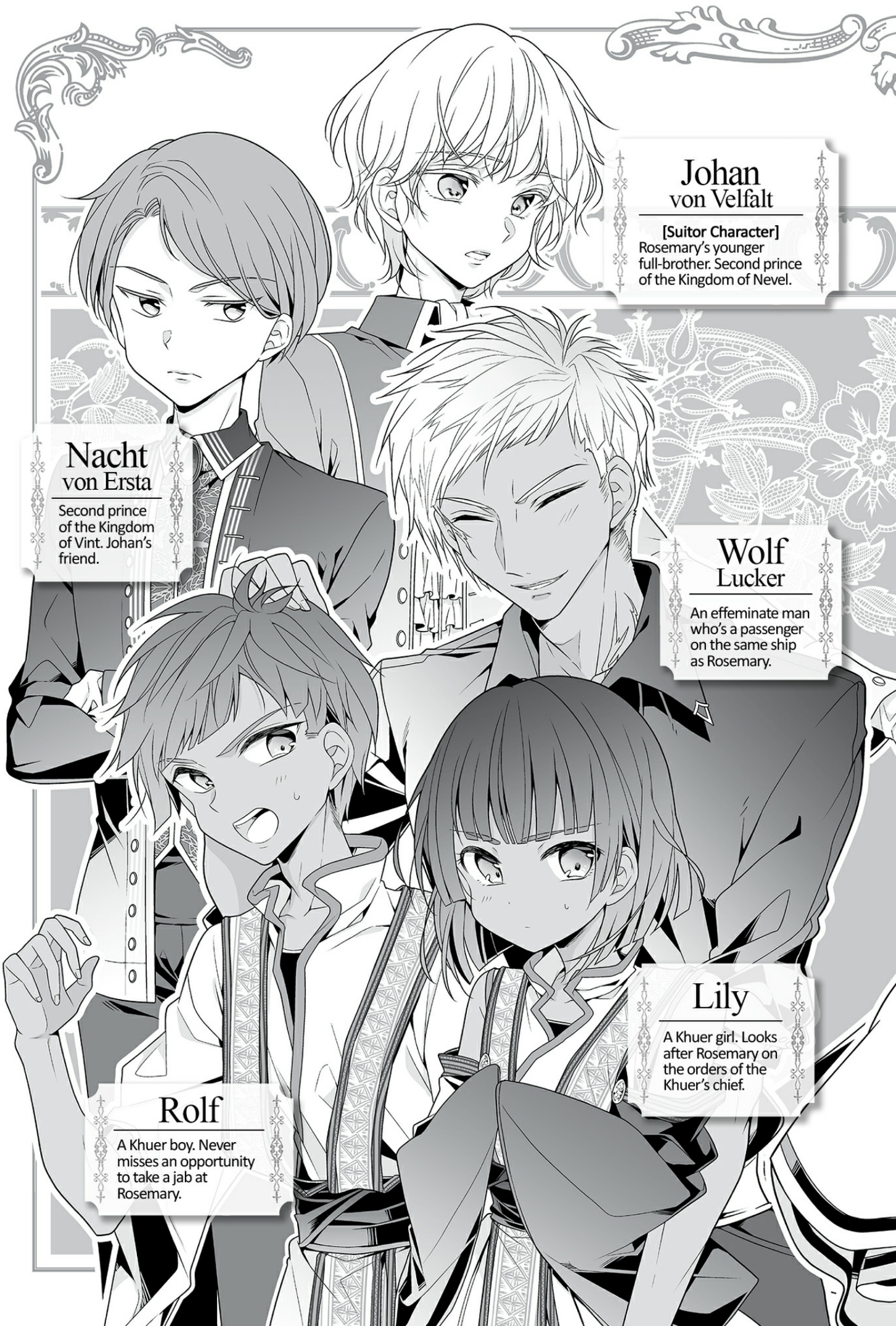
Leonhart von Orsein

The knight captain of the Kingdom of Nevel's royal guard. The number one swordsman in the country. Rosemary's love interest.

Rosemary von Velfalt

A girl who was reincarnated into the world of an otome game and retained the memories of her past life. First princess of the Kingdom of Nevel. Resolves to rectify the suitor characters' personality faults in order to achieve a peaceful future.

CAST OF CHARACTERS



Johan von Velfalt

[Suitor Character]
Rosemary's younger
full-brother. Second prince
of the Kingdom of Nevel.

Nacht von Ersta

Second prince
of the Kingdom
of Vint. Johan's
friend.

Wolf Lucker

An effeminate man
who's a passenger
on the same ship
as Rosemary.

Rolf

A Khuer boy. Never
misses an opportunity
to take a jab at
Rosemary.

Lily

A Khuer girl. Looks
after Rosemary on
the orders of the
Khuer's chief.

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Cast of Characters](#)

[Prologue](#)

[The Viscount's Daughter Reminisces](#)

[The Exhaustion of the Marquis's Son](#)

[The Reincarnated Princess in Turmoil](#)

[The Marquis's Son Frets](#)

[The Personal Guard in Anguish](#)

[The Second Prince Mingles](#)

[The Reincarnated Princess's Journey](#)

[Unrest for the First Prince](#)

[The Reincarnated Princess Feels Uneasy](#)

[The Second Prince's Inspection](#)

[The Reincarnated Princess in Indecision](#)

[The Reincarnated Princess's Aspiration](#)

[The Sorcerers' Hunch](#)

[The Reincarnated Princess's Determination](#)

[The Future Chief's Elation](#)

[The Reincarnated Princess's Shock](#)

[The Second Prince's Search](#)

[A Reunion for the Reincarnated Princess](#)

[The Viscount's Daughter Has a Hunch](#)

[The Second Prince's Decision](#)

[The Second Prince's Struggle](#)

[Prince Grouchy's Hope](#)

[The Second Prince's Hope](#)

[Character Designs](#)

[Bonus Textless Cover](#)

[Bonus Short Stories](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

Prologue

To my dear Sir Leonhart,

How are you faring in this spell of hot weather?

“There are a lot of rocks to trip you up around here, so watch where you’re walking.”

“Hellooo? Are you okay? Your legs are trembling like a newborn horse.”

Although I have only just arrived in Flanmer, it feels like I haven’t seen your face in years. I know it’s too soon to feel homesick. I’m sure you’ll have a good laugh at me.

“Hey, have you forgotten how to form words or something?”

When I close my eyes, I can see the land I call home, so far away now. On the far bank of the river, amongst the sprawling field of pretty flowers, someone’s waving at me. It can’t be anyone I know, surely. But she seems so familiar... Ah, she’s—

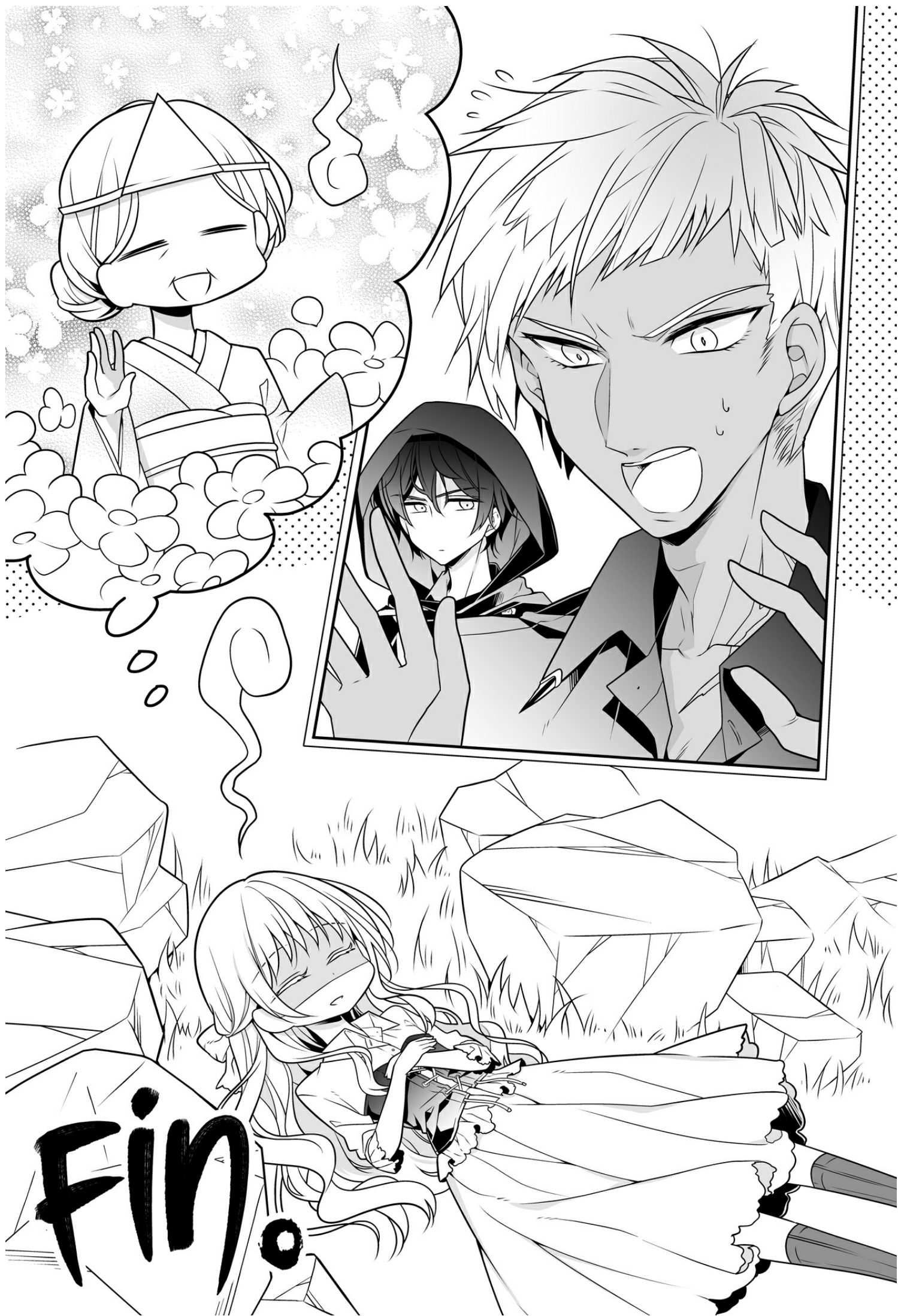
“She looks beat. Hey, she’ll pop her clogs if we don’t stop for a break.”

“Pull yourself together, Mary! Do you remember who I am?”

“—my grandmother...who died...three years ago. *Cough.*”

“Mary!!!”

The scared look on Wolf’s face was the last thing I saw before my mind blacked out and I shuffled off this mortal coil to be reunited with my late grandmother.



“Here, some water.”

I took the canteen with trembling hands. With some assistance from the ever-helpful Wolf, I managed to raise it to my lips. I savored the refreshing feeling of the water trickling down my esophagus, and as I was drinking, choking occasionally, my brain finally got back to work.

“I’m alive again...”

You were never dead, Rose, I mentally corrected myself. And what’s “my grandmother who died three years ago” supposed to mean anyway? My Hidden World grandparents both passed on before I was born, and my Japanese grandmother was fitter than I was. In fact, she’d actually outlived me.

“It’s great that you’re back to being a human. That weird *khhh phhh* way you were breathing had me worried for a minute there.”

*Yep, I agree. I sounded like D*rth Vader. And I know I seemed pretty far removed from the human race, considering that my legs were quaking and I was panting too much to speak. But I can hardly be blamed for that, now, can I?*

“Palace life hasn’t built me to climb mountains. I’m just a frail little girl...”

With my head lowered, I could see the view behind me—red earth and the trees of the forest stretched across the foot of the mountain. And beyond that, the horizon. Presently, I was halfway up a mountain in the southwest part of Flanmer. In other words, I was participating in a much-loved pastime: mountain climbing.

How did it come to this?

The Viscount's Daughter Reminisces

The sounds of activity had died away, leaving the mansion perfectly quiet.

Most had given in to sleep, including the injured patients who'd finished their treatments and the carers who'd treated them. The noble boy and a few of the sailors had gone for a discussion with the town's representatives.

I was exhausted as well, but I was putting off sleep. Instead of resting, I washed my face and then took a stroll around the estate. My legs brought me to the door of one particular room.

Several times, I almost knocked on the door, only to hesitate and stare at it in silence. When I did finally knock, a reserved voice immediately called out to me from inside.

I placed a hand on the doorknob, but it wouldn't turn. Not because it was rusted or for any other physical reason, but because my lack of courage was robbing me of strength.

I took a deep breath and twisted harder. The door creaked open.

A bed had been set up in the room, and a man who'd been on the verge of death just a few hours prior was sleeping upon it. Another younger man was sitting on a simple chair by the bedside, watching over the sleeping man. A thick book rested on the young man's lap, likely supplied by someone to help him pass the time.

The young man raised his head. "Bianca," he said, not appearing surprised.

"Can we talk a little?" I asked nervously.

Michael, my little brother, put on a modest smile and nodded.

I shut the door behind me and stepped inside the room. There was an open space at the foot of the bed near Klaus, the sleeping man. I sat down.

When I did, Michael frowned at me. "Sister." His tone was critical this time.

I reached out a hand to calm him down. "It's fine. It'll take more than this to

wake him up.”

Klaus had pushed his body and mind right up to their breaking points, so he’d be out for a full day, at least. In fact, it would’ve been far more shocking if he *had* woken up.

Michael didn’t chastise me any further, so he must’ve agreed.

His face seemed more mature now, and I wasn’t sure how to feel about that. Was I happy or sad? I couldn’t put it into words. He’d even combed his bangs back so they didn’t cover half his face like they used to. That small change gave him a completely different appearance. The bags beneath his eyes had vanished, as had the frightened little animallike look in his eyes. Those eyes, a blue so dark that they were almost black, now appeared calm and tranquil.

“You’ve turned into quite the man now,” I said softly.

Michael smiled wryly. “I don’t think so. I’m pretty much the same as always.”

I almost returned the same smile. *No, you’re not. You’ve changed so much. For instance, you’ve learned how to speak your mind without stuttering. And don’t you realize that you’re looking me in the eyes while you’re talking to me?*

His personality had undergone just as radical of a change as his appearance had, but I decided against pointing that out to him. It was half because I didn’t want to upset him, but the other half of me was just being an indignant child; I didn’t want to acknowledge the fact that he’d changed without me knowing.

“Let me start again,” I said. “It’s been a while, Michael.”

“It has, Bianca. I’m sorry for not finding the time to come and visit you.”

“You should be,” I said teasingly. “What a heartless little brother I have. Makes me wanna cry.”

Michael’s expression became troubled.

He’d run away from our home and hadn’t come back, not even once, in the entire time he’d spent as a priest-in-training at the Great Temple. It made sense that he hadn’t visited after entering the palace—being an apprentice sorcerer had fettered him with all sorts of restrictions. But when he’d been a priest-in-training, he would’ve only needed to submit a simple application... That

would've allowed him to return home once a year. The fact that he hadn't done so meant he simply hadn't wanted to visit.

I could understand why he felt that way. Our home held only bad memories for Michael. Children born with magical powers often faced rejection from their parents. While our parents were no exception to that rule, that didn't tell the whole story.

My father had a lover. She wasn't a quick fling either; they'd been together since he was a child. If she'd been of a higher class, then she likely would've been the one to become my father's wife, rather than my mother. The lover lived on the grounds of our estate, and she was a purehearted maiden, adored not only by my father but by the servants as well.

As such, the Diebolt House was no home for my mother. Her health deteriorated day by day. She envied my father's lover but was too timid to do anything about it, so she let her feelings build up inside with no release. Her only support came from the handful of maids who'd accompanied her when she'd moved away from her family's household. Before long, my mother began to spend her days entirely within her own bedroom, rarely even leaving her bed.

The lover and my father had a son. He had been legitimized because of my mother's failure to produce any children for her husband, but even so, he was still considered to be of common birth. The adoption of a bastard as my father's heir didn't sit well with many of my family's friends and relatives. Some even began to blatantly disassociate themselves from my father, leaving him almost without friends. He must've panicked.

But, that all changed when my mother became pregnant.

Although the baby turned out to be me, a girl, my father did begin to pay my mother more attention and visit her more often. Actually, that phrasing wasn't exactly appropriate—she was his wife, so he *returned* to her.

And then, the following year, Michael was born. My father and the servants both rejoiced at the long-awaited arrival of a trueborn heir. Those were most likely the happiest days of my mother's life.

However, that joy was short-lived.

Robbed of her beloved and distraught, my father's lover suffered an emotional breakdown. After that, my father spent most of his time by her side, unable to abandon the woman he'd always loved. But, he wasn't able to completely set my mother aside either, and so he'd turn up every so often to keep her happy. Even as a young girl, I was disgusted by the way that my father played both sides. Perhaps my distrust of men stemmed from this episode.

I swore to myself that I'd protect my mother and my brother in my father's place. I doted on Michael most of all... He truly meant the world to me. My mother mostly confined herself to her bed, so I was the one who spent the most time with him. As such, I was also the first one to notice his powers.

If I recall correctly, it happened in spring, the year when I turned six. I pricked myself with a rose thorn while playing in the garden. Blood trickled from my finger, but it wasn't me that burst into tears at the sight—it was Michael. He then took my hand in his. With his child's lisp, he recited over and over, "Pain, pain, go away!" I found his desperation adorable. It made me so happy.

I would've smiled and said, *"It's all better now,"* to appease his heart.

I would have.

But I couldn't. Because, when I looked, there was no cut on my finger. The blood was still there, but I saw not even a trace of the broken skin that should've been beneath it.

I couldn't make sense of it. I examined each of my fingers, figuring that I was looking at the wrong one, but there was no wound. A cut large enough to draw blood had vanished in an instant. Even a small child like me knew how abnormal that was.

"Did you do that?" I asked Michael.

As a test, I pricked another finger with a thorn and asked Michael, "Can you make it better for me?" He made the cut disappear. My eyes weren't playing tricks on me, and I wasn't misunderstanding things either.

Michael seemed unsure of himself, but I pulled him into a hug, smiled, and thanked him. Then, I made him promise not to use his powers in front of

anyone else.

Michael's magic evaded detection for the next few years. Whenever father made one of his infrequent visits to our mother, Michael desperately tried to bring the two of them together. Perhaps he knew that he was the only one who could keep their nearly broken marriage from collapsing entirely. With a bright smile, he jumped from one topic to another, trying to keep the faltering conversation from dying out. That couldn't have been easy for someone as timid and reserved as Michael.

One day during all of this, my mother hurt herself just as I had—a finger pricked by a rose thorn. I can't blame Michael for what he did next; he probably just wanted to make her smile. He must've thought he'd get affection and thanks from our mother and father, just as he had from me.

Instead, when he healed her finger, he was subjected to hatred, fear, and an outburst of rage.

My father cursed Michael as a monster and declared that he couldn't be his son. He then turned on our mother, accusing her of consorting with a beast to conceive Michael.

After that, my mother stopped leaving her room entirely, as she was too afraid of her own son. She cried and wailed, broke down, and eventually wasted away entirely. She died in that room.

Left on his own, Michael blamed himself. This young child groveled at my feet and begged me for forgiveness... For taking my mother from me, for causing our father to leave.

But it wasn't his fault. What crime could this sweet young boy possibly have committed? He'd only wanted to make everyone smile. He'd only wanted to hear someone thank him. However, my countless attempts to reassure him that it wasn't his fault...never reached his heart.

He developed a stooping posture and grew his bangs out, as though he were trying to hide away from the watchful gazes around him. He rarely left the house and wouldn't speak, even with the servants. I became his sole conversation partner.

Our father let us stay in his mansion, fearing the bad publicity that would follow if he kicked us out, but he refused to take any part in our lives. He didn't even assign us teachers, which led to me growing up somewhat eccentric, at least as far as nobles went. That didn't bother me though. I was planning to leave that house soon enough anyway.

I didn't have a husband lined up, so I figured that I'd go off and join a convent.

Michael's departure from our house, without even a word to me, had come as a shock. Ultimately though, it had been for the best.

As I gazed upon the grown-up Michael before me right now, I became certain of that.

"Hey, Michael?"

"Yeah?"

"You don't regret it?" I didn't say what "it" was, but I was sure that he knew exactly what I meant.

He had used his powers to save Klaus—powers he'd kept a secret his whole life. His abilities had given him nothing but trauma; they'd driven his parents apart after he'd worked so hard to keep them together. Using his magic had probably caused him unbearable emotional agony, and I doubted that the mental scar left by his own father calling him a monster had healed yet.

Even so...

Michael let out a soft chuckle. He smiled sincerely, a kind look in his eyes. "Have you spoken to the princess, Bianca?"

Little brother, tell me... When did you learn to smile like that?

I didn't manage to immediately connect the word "princess" with the young girl I'd befriended on our voyage, so my response came after a brief pause. "Oh, of course. Mary and I are best buddies," I said jokingly.

Mary was a charming girl, wise and mature, but she still had an adorable nature common to girls her age. She didn't act pompously; if anything, she was easy to get along with. She didn't *feel* like royalty, even though I'd found out

that she was. But, it was strange—she'd verbally bested the townsfolk who'd tried to turn us away, and when I recalled the image of her like that, I *could* picture her as royalty.

"Oh, you have," said Michael.

"Yep. You think I'd let a cute girl like that get away?"

Michael smiled gently. "You're right. She's exactly your type."

"I thought a princess had stepped right out of a picture book." My fanciful way of thinking was a little embarrassing, but it wasn't a million miles distant from the truth. Reality could, at times, be stranger than fiction. "And she's as adorable on the inside as she is on the outside. She really surprised me. I mean, she's so pretty that nobody can take their eyes off her, but she doesn't behave at all like she's better than the rest of us."

"Yeah," Michael agreed. "She's amazing. She doesn't act like a big deal, but she is."

That was an odd way to phrase it, but I knew what he meant. Mary didn't look down on anyone. She treated nobles and commoners equally and with the utmost sincerity. At the same time, she had no qualms about utilizing her royal identity to stand up for others. She possessed those two seemingly mutually exclusive qualities in equal measure.

"She doesn't overuse her royal authority," he said, "but she does everything to fulfill her duties. She's a girl that's even younger than me, but she doesn't have to force herself and overreach... No, it all comes naturally to her. She amazed me. And at the same time, she made me feel embarrassed about the way I was."

His face scrunched up like he had a terrible taste in his mouth, and I didn't know what to say to him.

"Michael..."

"I have a unique ability that other people don't. It might not be the easiest power to use, with all its restrictions, but it's still a blessing... It can help people. But I only ever thought of it as a curse." Michael lowered his head and clasped his hands together. "I thought that if I tried to help, I'd be shunned... That I

couldn't make anybody happy by healing them. That they'd say, 'Get away from me, monster.' So I told myself that I'd be better off not using it, that I could help people without relying on my power."

I couldn't accuse him of acting paranoid. The citizens of the Kingdom of Nevel were tough on magic users. People ostracized oddities. That was an instinct necessary to avoid danger and ensure a long life, and it couldn't be reasoned with. If Michael had used his powers to help people, I couldn't imagine that every single person he saved would thank him for it. In fact, I expected that most of them would be fearful.

"But it doesn't matter what my rationale was," he said. "I was just looking the other way. I was turning my eyes away from lives that I could've saved."

"But... That's not...!" "*That's not true!*" I tried to say, but the words didn't come out.

His eyes still pointing down, Michael slowly shook his head. "It is. Maybe somewhere out there in the world there's someone who caught a cold and died, or someone who lost their life after their wound festered. I could have saved them."

"You can't save everyone in the world! Don't mix up ideals and reality!"

"I know. But the only ones who have any right to say that are people who've tried."

I had no rebuttal for that.

Michael kept going, continuing his explanation. "At least, I don't have the right to say that. All I ever did was shut my eyes, curl up into a ball, and wait for everything to pass. Moreover, the princess would never claim that 'you can't save everyone.' If there were a loss of life that she could've prevented, perhaps by being more skilled, she wouldn't be caught dead saying 'that's just how things go.'" Michael raised his head. His eyes looked as calm as a lakeshore on a windless night.

I looked intently at him while remembering the princess. Her eyes had been just as calm.

When faced with the possibility of someone dying in front of her, Mary had

cried and been shaken, but she'd never come close to giving up. She'd summoned every ounce of the courage that had almost faded from her, had gritted her teeth, had stood up.

If, hypothetically (and I shudder to consider this, even with that qualification), Klaus hadn't made it...what would Mary have done? Would she have said that there was no helping it? Would she have tried to comfort herself by declaring that ideals don't always work in real life?

No way. And if anyone had tried to console her with those same words, she would have disagreed. She wouldn't try to validate her own actions as the best that she could've done but would've instead blamed herself for being powerless. She'd save all the culpability for herself and wouldn't apportion any to the rest of us.

"When you've chosen your path, you don't pin the blame on others," Michael said. "You accept what happens, even if it doesn't go well, or if your efforts are in vain. I've finally decided that I want to be like that." His expression was calm, his voice soft. "I've decided to tackle things head-on, no matter who rejects me or despises me for it. I'm weak, so I was sure that I'd waver, but I've made up my mind—I will *not* give up. But..."

The corners of Michael's eyes crinkled. A faint blush rose to his cheeks, and then he happily continued on. "There have also been plenty of good things that I hadn't expected. I've made a friend. I've found a teacher. Miss Irene, the Head Sorceress in the royal palace, is strict, but she's so nice. She's always looking out for me. And my friend, George... He was shocked when he found out about my powers, but it didn't make him dislike me. He said it was just part of who I was. I've never actually shown him my magic, but I have faith now that he wouldn't think any differently of me."

"Right." I found myself smiling back at him. I did feel lonely seeing my adorable little brother finding independence, but more than that, I felt happy. *He won't be on his own anymore, even without me there.* An honest sense of pride swelled up within me.

"Back then, I only ever saw half of the whole picture," Michael said. "But now, I know better—there are just as many joyous things in this world as there are

scary ones, and though some people may reject me, there are people who will accept me for who I am. So I'm fine. Even if someone who means a lot to me pushes me away, I can still find value in myself... That's..."

Michael's voice began to tremble and his words trailed off. "That's what I thought... But..." His eyes, deep indigo blue, the color of the night sky, welled up and spilled over, and the translucent tears slipped down his face like raindrops.

I froze, not sure what had caused this outpouring of emotion, and then Michael covered his face with his hands. He curled his body inward, pressing his head against his knees.

"Michael?" I leaped off of the bed. The mattress bounced and gave Klaus's body a jolt, but I was too preoccupied to be worried about him. Standing in front of Michael, I placed my hands on his shoulders and stared at his face. I couldn't see his expression behind his hands, but the teardrops that fell through the gaps between his fingers gave voice to the emotions he must've felt. "Michael..."

"She sa...than...ou," he cried, his voice croaking from heightened emotion.

"Huh?" I couldn't make out what he'd said.

But before I had a chance to ask him to repeat himself, Michael raised his head.

I gasped, not believing my eyes. I'd thought that his face would be scrunched up in sadness, or maybe contorted in a pitiable picture of barely restrained anguish.

But instead, Michael was smiling. His cheeks were flushed with joy, and the corners of his mouth and eyes were relaxed, speaking to the unfathomable extent of his happiness.

"She said, 'Thank you,'" he whispered, like a child showing off their most precious treasure, each word imbued with joy. "She cried and said, 'Thank you for saving my dear friend.' She held my hands so tightly and thanked me from the bottom of her heart."

Michael finally got what he's deserved for so long. The realization hit me like a

brick. This child, whose father had disavowed him, whose mother had feared him, had finally been told the words that he'd wanted to hear. Michael hadn't been after respect or commendation, hadn't wanted titles or honor, and certainly not money. Just those simple words, 'thank you,' were enough for him.

"I'm so happy for you, Michael." I leaned over to him and gently brought his head into my embrace.

I couldn't stop myself from smiling. My heart was overflowing with elation rather than sadness. *These light pangs of loneliness will surely turn into happiness one day, so I'll be fine.*

"Yeah. Bianca, I'm glad I have this power."

My heart swelled. I'd prayed for this day to come...the day that I would hear him say those words. I hadn't in my wildest dreams imagined that I'd get to hear them so soon.

"Yeah."

Gone was the little boy who'd hide behind me, crying. Michael would set forth on his life's journey, step by step, his eyes gleaming with resolve. And he'd find more and more people who mattered to him along the way.

"You don't need me around anymore," I said.

"Bianca?"

I could feel Michael stir within my arms. But I put more strength into my embrace and kept his head facing down. I didn't want him to see my face right now... It looked too pathetic.

"I'm a terrible sister. I've been getting in the way of you becoming independent. And look at me, chasing after you all the way out here... Being overprotective is one thing, but this is just clingy." *Instead of sheltering my precious brother, I should've trusted and watched over him as he followed his own course. I get that now.* "I was smothering you. I'm sorry."

"Bianca."

"But I was worried, you know? You're so innocent, and I couldn't get the idea

out of my head that some wicked woman would snatch you up. But clearly, you know a good girl when you see one, so I don't have to worry about that anymore."

"Bianca."

"I won't tell you what to do anymore. From now on, you can do what—"

"Bianca!" Michael called, a little firmly, and he freed himself from my arms.

He was strong enough now to overpower me. When had that happened? *Ohhh. Who was I, thinking I could protect him? Those days are long gone... But, I'm glad. You can handle yourself now. I'm so proud of you, Michael, my dear little brother.*

"Bianca... Don't cry."

"Huh?" A stunned murmur escaped my lips. Michael's hand brushed against my cheek and wiped a tear away. I must've been crying without realizing it. *Why?*

"I've never thought that you were smothering me," he said.

"No, you're kind like that," I replied with a self-deprecating smile.

But then, Michael started to look slightly angry. "That's not it. You're the one who's kind, not me. All I ever did was cry, but you would hug me and stay by my side, always. How *couldn't* I adore you?"

"Michael?"

"I love you. Without you, I would've lost myself ages ago. I'm only here now because of your constant outpouring of love for me." He gently pulled me into his embrace. I felt the firm sensation of his body, once so thin and feeble, but now that of a man. "And because I love you, I didn't want to burden you."

I couldn't let that go unchallenged. "How could you say that?" I asked sharply as my head snapped up. "I have *never* thought of you as a burden!"

I glared at him, but his face, now a little higher than my own, broke into a cheerful smile. "Yeah, I know. But I wanted you to be happy. You were always looking out for me and putting yourself second. I just wanted you to think of your own happiness."

“That’s why you left without saying anything?”

Michael watched my eyes grow as wide as saucers, and he smiled wryly. “Yeah. If I’d told you, you would’ve stopped me.” Then, he brought his head against my cheek, snuggling up to me. “I’m not just a kid who has to hide behind you anymore. I’m strong enough to see you off as you begin the journey to make yourself happy.”

Why won’t he say, “I’ll be the one to make you happy”? He just doesn’t get how women think... No, he doesn’t understand how my motherly mind works. What brings me joy is being your sister. I want to get along well with you and to be friends with your future bride. And if I can cradle in my arms a child you bring into this world...I’ll have nothing else to wish for.

But you’ll tell me that such a future wouldn’t be my happiness, won’t you? You want me to find people who’ll be important to me, just as you have... To expand my horizons.

You’ve grown up, Michael. I miss what we had. But I’m happy for you.

“I’ll find someone worthy of you, someone who I can trust to look after you,” he said. “I’ll put them to the test and push them to their limits, and if they still want you after that, I’ll give you both my blessing.”

I laughed. “Do you even hear yourself?”

“I’ll say, ‘Take care of my sister because she means everything to me.’ And I’ll hand you over with a smile on my face.”

Michael’s nose was burning bright red, and I pinched it. “You’re my *little* brother, remember? Don’t get ahead of yourself.”

If such a bright future is in store for me, then I’m sure this pain in my heart will be worthwhile, I thought and smiled through my tears, just like Michael.

The Exhaustion of the Marquis's Son

In Garnele, a small port town located in Flanmer's south-southwest, there was a house built atop a hillock overlooking the coastline. I, George zu Eigel, was standing in a room in this house. I'd been holding my breath, but I released it now and sighed.

My talk with the sailors and town representatives had dragged on for almost three hours. I considered myself accustomed to conferences, but my primary experience came from negotiating with nobles and merchants rather than agitated townsfolk. This discussion—if it could even be called that—had demanded a great deal of patience from me.

The townsfolk had frantically tried to justify their mistreatment of foreign royalty. They'd started with an appeal to our emotions, claiming that they'd simply been trying to protect their families. Then, they'd used their provision of a house and medical equipment to defend themselves. Finally, they'd questioned whether Mary was an actual princess. At that point, they must've been grasping at straws to enhance their negotiating position, but they couldn't have committed a worse folly.

"Does Flanmer have no statutes on defamation?" I'd asked with a false display of politeness. Hearing that, they'd blanched and fallen silent.

The negotiations had proceeded rather smoothly once I'd broken their fighting spirits.

A swift rider had been dispatched to Flanmer's capital with a report of the unauthorized docking, along with a request for permission to enact special emergency measures. This request was made to safeguard the wounded and organize an armed subjugation of the remaining pirates.

I arranged for them not to disclose the princess's presence here, weaving my reasoning into an argument that doubled as a threat: the princess was here in secret, and violating that secret would indeed have ramifications on diplomatic relations. Also, if news of Lady Mary's arrival reached the Kingdom of Flanmer's

top brass, the townsfolk would be in trouble for treating her inappropriately.

Ascertaining the demerits of such an act, most of the gathered townsfolk agreed without further objection. The remaining dissenters settled down after I informed them that they would be shown the utmost gratitude by the family of Marquis Eigel and the renowned merchant Julius zu Eigel.

“I’m exhausted...” My complaint rolled off of my tongue and vanished amid the clamor inside the room.

Nobody heard it, but I shouldn’t have said it at all. I steeled my expression. Letting my guard down the moment the negotiations had finished... I should’ve known better. If my uncle Julius had been here, I knew that he would’ve criticized me while wearing that smile of his.

I stood up from my seat, glanced around, and cleared my throat. Having caught the attention of a few people in the room, I announced that I was leaving, and I made my exit.

My to-do list was long, but I figured that I should check in on Sir Behlmer first. I thought that I might take Michael’s place watching over him and perhaps let Michael take a break.

Also, if Lady Mary’s awake, then I’ll have a light meal prepared for her. Any talk can wait until after that’s done... The two of us need to have a long discussion about what to do going forward, I told myself. As levelheaded a discussion as possible.

The best option would be to entrust Lady Mary to the protection of Flanmer and have them return her to Nevel. However, that was just my personal opinion. I hadn’t been told Lady Mary’s reasons for visiting Flanmer, but it surely wasn’t for sightseeing, and I wasn’t eager to be the one to crush Lady Mary’s determination without hearing her out first.

That said, I couldn’t very well stand by and watch her plunge herself into danger.

My thoughts oscillated back and forth between two extremes, and I grew frustrated. I exhaled a second sigh, giving release to my pent-up feelings.

Suddenly, a girl’s high-pitched voice rang out, stopping me. “Excuse me,

George.”

I looked over my shoulder and saw a slender girl standing there. She must’ve been around fifteen years old. Something seemed familiar about her wavy, strawberry-blond hair and her downturned blue-gray eyes. She had called me by name, so there was a good chance that we were acquainted.

Whether it was due to natural talent or the benefits of coming up under the wing of my uncle, I was confident in my ability to remember faces. Yet, for some reason, I had trouble placing this girl. It would’ve been rather discourteous to ask a lady whether we’d met before, so I plastered on a faint smile. That had been my uncle’s advice for scenarios like this—when unsure of what to do, just grin and pretend.

But this girl didn’t buy my act.

She smiled awkwardly, then gently lifted her skirt and bent her knees, performing a curtsy as she greeted me. “I’m the eldest daughter of Baron Gratz, Flora von Gratz.”

Apparently, her great-aunt had connections with my family, and hearing her say that triggered my memory. She was the girl that I’d met about a year ago when I’d paid a visit to her great-aunt Mahlich.

No wonder I couldn’t recognize her, I thought, feeling stunned. The look on her face is completely different.

Due to my position as heir to Marquis Eigel, and perhaps because of the looks I’d inherited from my mother, I’d often found myself surrounded by young girls... Although I’d never once been pleased about that.

These young ladies had all feigned modesty and acted ladylike, but looks could be deceiving—each one had the eyes of a predator in search of prey. And while they acted cordially to one another on the surface, they would denigrate the other girls without dropping their faux-innocent demeanor. Fights between women were fierce.

I found them more scary than I did cute. Although, when I’d told my uncle this, he’d sighed and chewed me out.

To put it simply, Flora had been just another noble girl cast in that mold. After

hearing the tone of her voice and seeing her smile, then glimpsing her thinly veiled arrogance behind that facade, I'd thought to myself, without particular emotion, that her future husband would have his work cut out for him.

And yet, when I looked now at the nervous smile she was showing me, I didn't feel uncomfortable. The simple light-green dress that she wore on her slim body added to the effect, making her seem like any other ordinary girl. Her facial expression was refreshing, like some menace possessing it had vanished.

Like two completely different people, I thought.

After staring at me intently for a while, her shoulders began to shake and she let out a quiet laugh.

"Flora...? Is there something on my face?" I scratched my cheek, expecting that I might find some dirt there.

Flora's grin grew wider. She gazed at me with the caring eyes of a mother watching her child make a mistake. "No. It's just... It's surprisingly easy to tell what you're thinking."

"Huh?"

"You're thinking, 'You look like a completely different person,' right?"

I instinctively covered my mouth.

"I could tell by the look on your face," she said, seeming proud of herself.

I'd heard my face described as an iron mask, but apparently, there were cracks in it. *When I get home, I'll have my uncle give me a few more lessons in concealing emotions*, I swore to myself, my head sinking.

"Do you mind if we take a walk and chat for a little while?" Flora asked.

This girl, who was younger than I was, was peering at me as if I were her maladjusted younger brother, and I knew that I couldn't style it out. So, I just shrugged my shoulders lightly and nodded.

We walked side by side down the long corridor and continued our conversation...if it could be called that, anyway. We had little in common to chat about other than her great-aunt Mahlich and my mother's health.

After a lull in the conversation, I changed topics to something that I expected would be harmless. “What did you come to Flanmer for, Flora?”

“I...”

However, Flora hesitated to answer, and her head sank.

I’d fully anticipated her to reply that she was here for sightseeing, but I’d misjudged that. I realized my mistake when I saw Flora’s beautiful eyebrows curve downward sadly. But the words had been uttered, and nothing I said could take them back.

While I was considering what to do, Flora forced herself to smile and dispelled the awkward atmosphere by returning the question. “What about you, George? What brings you to Flanmer?”

Grateful for her thoughtfulness, I answered honestly. “To search for something.”

“A search? Is that related to your busine— Forgive me, it’s not my place to ask.” Flora withdrew the query that she’d been halfway through asking. She must’ve realized that I’d been intentionally vague by using the word “something.”

“Not at all. It’s just that I’m searching for it on behalf of another person, so I’m not at liberty to discuss it.”

“You came all the way to Flanmer...on behalf of someone else?”

When I saw the surprise on Flora’s face, I keenly felt how unusual my actions had been. The distance to Flanmer was too far to travel out of affection or goodwill for someone else. Even I would be shocked if I’d observed someone doing that. *Well, good for you*, I would’ve thought, exasperated.

I can’t help it though. I want to do something for her. “Do you think I’m silly?” I asked with an awkward smile.

Flora seemed at a loss for words. She looked up at my face and hesitated for a moment, then shook her head. “That person must be very important to you.”

I lost my tongue.

“I can tell just looking at you,” Flora said.

Instinctively, I covered my mouth with my hand, and I could feel my cheeks reddening. I was aware of how I felt about Lady Mary, but it was still embarrassing to hear someone else point it out. That mortification grew stronger when I recalled the sight of her crying a few hours before.

Which reminds me, I made quite the fool of myself earlier. I must've looked pathetic, standing there blushing and stuttering away, unable to find anything smart to say to Lady Mary... I wonder what she thought about that. I hope she forgets, but I doubt I'll get so lucky.

"Please stop staring at me," I whined pathetically, unable to endure her gaze.

Flora smiled. She cleared her throat softly and appeared to be enjoying herself. But at the same time, I sensed sadness in her blue-gray eyes for some reason.

"Flora?"

"Is something the matter?" I'd been about to ask, but my words were interrupted by a loud noise.

The sound of shattering glassware.

Flora and I simultaneously turned to look in the direction of the sound.

"Isn't that the princess's room...?" Flora murmured, her eyes fixed on the door to the corner room at the end of the hallway.

I gasped. The instant her words reached my ears, I ran. Grabbing the doorknob, I nearly rushed inside the room, but I managed to come to a stop.

It would be extremely improper to barge into a room where a lady was resting, especially if that lady was a princess. *But what if it's an emergency?* My hesitation lasted for only a few seconds.

"Pardon me!!!" I threw the door open.

The thugs that I'd imagined I would find in the room were nowhere to be seen. No, the room was tidy, and the only things out of place were shards of glass scattered in front of the walnut chest under the windowsill.

Judging from the blue flowers among the shards and a wet patch on the rug, I surmised that a vase had tumbled and broken. Perhaps it had been knocked

over by the fluttering curtains.

I almost breathed a sigh of relief, but after looking around the room, I noticed something else that was odd: *she* wasn't here. Atop the sofa, where Lady Mary ought to have been sleeping, was just a light blanket.

She was gone.

"Lady Mary?" I called.

Nobody answered.

I stood there in a daze, watching the curtains sway in the salt breeze that blew through the open window.

The Reincarnated Princess in Turmoil

Firewood crackled in the dancing flames of the hearth. The flickering light painted the dim room red, and I watched the fire aimlessly. My nose itched with the smell of smoke and the musty odor in the air. Rain was soon to come.

The windows were boarded up, preventing me from checking the state of the world outside. I glanced up and found a damaged spot on the roof that was beginning to fall apart; through the hole, I could glimpse a small portion of the dense grove of trees outside, though I couldn't see the sky beyond them. A bird sitting atop a branch chirped and tilted its head.

I was currently inside a small, deserted house in a forest. From the outside, the structure looked so derelict that I wasn't sure how it was still standing, but the interior was surprisingly well-kept. The Khuer tribe liked to avoid detection when they moved about, and apparently, they'd stay in this building from time to time.

I let out a little sigh.

I wonder how Klaus is doing. Will he have woken up yet? Actually...I hope he hasn't. I really want him to rest, but if he awakens and finds out that I'm missing, he'll probably do the opposite of that. My wish is that he puts his own health first for now.

If I could just meet with him, tell him to sit still, and let him know that I'll come home safe and sound... But, fat chance of that happening.

"Mary."

I heard my name called, which interrupted my thoughts and brought my focus back to the real world. When I looked up, I saw a hand held out in front of me, offering some bread with a topping of dried meat that had been roasted over the fire. It looked tough but smelled good. I wasn't quite sure whether I'd accept it though.

"Not gonna eat?" The man sitting next to me was the one holding the bread,

and he tilted his head in puzzlement.

Just like what I saw the bird do a second ago, I thought, trying to distract myself. I decided to take the food.

“Enjoy,” he said with a smile. It was strange... He was acting like this was all normal.

Maybe I’m the weird one for getting worked up...? No, that can’t be it. Surely not. Come on, common sense, put up more of a fight!

I mumbled an unenthusiastic thank you and gingerly took a bite of the bread. It was very tough, just as I’d imagined. I thought I might crack my teeth on it. *This is preserved food living up to its reputation.* The bread made a snapping noise that food should never make as I gnawed bits off and chewed. It felt like I was giving my jaw a workout.

The man smiled sadly as he watched me roll the bread around the inside of my mouth, unable to swallow. “Sorry. I know it’s not the best meal. I’ll be able to do some shopping when we get a little farther away from the village, and then I can give you some proper food.”

When he says “a little farther away from the village,” he means once we shake off the people looking for us, right? It’s an odd thing to say to the person he’s abducted.

I pulled a funny face and looked at my kidnapper—Wolf.

Instead of saying anything, he broadened his smile. His eyebrows drooped ever so slightly, as if he wasn’t sure what to say to me.

I felt like there were infinite questions that I wanted to ask him, but after seeing the look on his face, I became unsure of how to broach them.

Why had he kidnapped me in the first place? Chances were slim that he’d done it for the money. I didn’t base my reasoning on an appraisal of his character or on emotional grounds—simply put, the odds of successfully ransoming me were low. To the world, I was a princess. Kidnapping me in order to demand compensation would incur too great a risk.

But, on the other hand, I had no personal value outside of being a princess. I

did have a way of knowing the future thanks to my knowledge of the game *Hidden World*, but only Sir Leonhart knew about that. Besides, this current reality had deviated in several ways from the world at the start of the game, so my “foresight” wasn’t particularly useful anymore.

The only other reason I could come up with for my kidnapping had farther-reaching implications. Was there a plot to incite a conflict between countries? For example, perhaps Lapter had masterminded my abduction to brew conflict between Flanmer and Nevel. However, that option seemed extremely unlikely because Wolf was a member of the Khuer tribe, who had no masters.

I really don’t understand why this is happening... If I were the daughter of a wealthy merchant, then there would be ways of exploiting me, but princesses are more trouble than they’re worth... There’s no safe way to get use out of us.

“Mary,” Wolf said.

I raised my head, and he flicked me between my eyes.

“You’re scowling. That’s a waste of your pretty face,” he whispered, letting out a breathy chuckle.

I groaned softly. “Whose fault is that?” I rubbed the spot that he’d flicked and looked up at him resentfully.

“Mine.” He didn’t try to argue, so I had to give up on the words I’d prepared to say.

I hesitated for a moment before taking the plunge and asking the question that had been foremost in my mind. “Why did you kidnap me? I really am a princess, you know?” As an afterthought, I added, “I’m sure that doesn’t seem believable though...”

Wolf smiled broadly. “I do know.”

“Then, why?! You won’t get off with a slap on the wrist for abducting a princess!!!”

“Worst case, I’ll be executed, I suppose.”

It annoyed me how unconcerned he sounded as he said that word, “executed.”

If you know that, then why did you do it? Wolf was a rare and valuable individual in possession of the knowledge and techniques to save lives. It would be terrible for him to throw his life away on a whim.

“You know that too, which is why you didn’t put up much of a fight, right?” he asked. “If anybody discovered that I’d kidnapped you, then you wouldn’t be able to explain it away. To avoid the possibility of me being charged as a criminal, you willingly came with me all the way out here. You have quite the soft heart, y’know?”

I bit down on my lip, annoyed that he was absolutely correct. Several times during our flight from the town to this forest, I’d had opportunities to call for aid. There were people who would’ve been close enough to hear me if I’d screamed, “Help!” But I couldn’t. If I acknowledged Wolf’s abduction of me, that would automatically make him a criminal.

I knew that every second this dragged on meant more work and more worry for a great number of people, but even so, I couldn’t take that step. I was neither strong enough nor self-reliant enough.

“It’s not too late to go back,” I said. “I’ll tell everyone that I snuck out on my own for personal reasons.”

Hearing that, Wolf’s eyes widened. My offer had apparently taken him by surprise. He blinked several times, then grinned, looking at me like I was a dim-witted child. “No. If I could give up that easily, I wouldn’t have done something as extreme as abducting a princess in the first place.”

“Why not?!” I leaned forward and let all the words that I wanted to say tumble out of my mouth. “Let me tell you, I’m just a little girl from a family too high-class for my own good! I don’t have any value!”

“You do,” Wolf countered, and I stopped moving.

I gasped. He was staring at me with such a serious look in his eyes that it was scary.

“You do have value.”

He peered straight into my eyes without any sign of doubt. It gave me the chills. That look overpowered me, and I lost my tongue.

Drip. A raindrop hit the floor, carried by the wind through a gap between the wall and the roof. I only then realized that it had started to rain. The drizzle and the crackling fire were the only sounds to be heard in the quiet room.

“There are plenty of wealthy people in this world,” Wolf explained. “Most of them only care about their own profits, but, of course, a few of them have a conscience. However, there are very few wealthy people who’d do what you did—go to every length to save one of your underlings. Actually...I don’t know *any* idiot besides you who would’ve done that.”

“No need to call me an idiot,” I mumbled dejectedly.

I knew that I was quibbling over nothing, but I couldn’t think of anything else to say. Wolf had probably used “idiot” with a certain degree of praise. No, “praise” was too diminutive to describe the passion he’d imparted in the word.

A bead of cold sweat trickled down my spine, not as a result of antipathy or discomfort, but from an instinctive fear of having higher hopes placed in me than I deserved. I still had no idea what Wolf wanted from me, but I felt like I’d glimpsed a fraction of his aims just then, perhaps a tiny fragment of his hopes... That on its own was enough to crush me.

“You think too highly of me,” I said. “There are plenty of better people.”

“How many royals or nobles would put everything on the line for their subordinates? How many of them would bow their heads to a commoner?”

“Wol—”

He suddenly grabbed my arms and pulled me around to face him directly. His grasp was so tight that I wouldn’t have been able to squirm away, and I couldn’t wrest my gaze from his eyes. “You need to realize the value you have.”

I gasped, my voice and body both trembling. My breath wasn’t coming properly, and I became light-headed. I panted, feeling like I was suffocating, but I wasn’t sure whether Wolf even noticed. He tried to continue what he was saying anyway.

“Mary, I—”

But he stopped abruptly. After a single moment of silence, he shoved me

away.

I landed on my rear end, and he jumped backward. Not a second later, something flew past the space between us and dug itself into the dirt floor with a thud. This object was now buried to the hilt in the spot where Wolf had just been.

It was a thin knife.

“A throwing knife...!” Wolf clicked his tongue and drew his own knife that’d been fastened to the belt around his waist.

As I sat there, unable to react and clueless about what was happening, I heard the flapping sound of a bird taking flight.

I stared up at the roof, and my body froze entirely. To be more accurate, I *couldn't* move. The rational part of me was scared that if I made the slightest movement, a knife might come flying toward me, and that thought drove all others from my mind. Another reason for my immobility was that my knees were too weak from fear to support my weight, so there was no way I could stand.

Sporadic raindrops, blown in by the wind, peppered my face while my gaze was fixed on the ceiling.

“Get back,” Wolf ordered, his voice low.

Still sitting on my rear, I kicked and pushed toward the wall in retreat.

Without lowering his guard, Wolf drew another knife. He now brandished two peculiarly shaped blades and had his eyes fixed on the ceiling.

The air was thick with tension, and the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. There was silence in the room itself, except for the sounds of foliage rustling in the rain and the wind. However, there was another muffled noise bellowing loudly in my ears. I covered them with my hands to shut out the horrible sound, but it didn't go away—it got louder. At that point, I realized that I was hearing my own pounding heart and heavy breathing.

I'm scared... So scared... Make this go away...

My mind was filled with whining and I was at my limit. First, I'd been attacked

by pirates on the ship, and now my life was in danger all over again. I'd been over my operating capacity for so long now.

Clonk. Our attention was captured by a slight noise. Wolf and I watched as a nut rolled along the floor.

I sighed, relieved.

Impeccably timed with my relief, the wooden boards blocking the window exploded into the room with a thunderous crash.

"Aaah!!!" I let out a shrill scream.

The impact from outside sundered the boards, scattering splinters into the air. As if that wasn't enough, another thin knife flew into the room. Wolf had brought his arms up to protect himself from the airborne wood chips, which delayed his reaction slightly. The knife headed for Wolf, and he only just managed to evade it... The blade nearly grazed his skin. Coming out of his dodge, Wolf lost his footing and stumbled a step forward.

A figure leaped through the window, taking advantage of Wolf's moment of vulnerability. The person landed like a skilled acrobat, and the bottom of his cloak flapped gracefully like a bird's wings.

He closed in without a single wasted movement and kicked one of Wolf's knives out of his hand. Wolf lunged with his other knife, but the intruder evaded it effortlessly. Wolf retreated back, putting distance between himself and the intruder while guarding the arm that had been kicked. I saw that it was now hanging limply.

"I recognize that getup," Wolf growled, his voice low. "You were on the ship. Or am I imagining things?"

The person remained silent.

Wolf's assertion didn't seem to rattle its intended recipient, the intruder, but it certainly sent me into a frenzy. *How could he have seen him on the ship? This man was traveling on the carrack with us?*

It prompted a nagging in the corner of my mind... I felt like I had a memory of seeing the intruder before, but my head was too jumbled with fear and stress to

have much chance of delivering a conclusive answer. *Has he been watching this whole time? No, waiting for his chance? To get Wolf? Or...to get me?*

If so, then why kill me now? I did have Klaus around me on the ship, but still, there must've been opportunities. If he'd wanted to, he would've had no problem taking advantage of the confusion and killing me when the pirates attacked. So, why now?

The fight raged on while I was distracted by those thoughts.

A large knife versus a small knife—no, a throwing knife. I'd thought that Wolf would have the upper hand in a close quarters fight, but he was actually losing ground.

Clicking his tongue in annoyance, Wolf lunged with his knife toward the intruder's face, but the attack only managed to nick the man's cloak. The intruder grabbed Wolf's outstretched arm, pulled him closer, and kned him in the stomach.

Wolf let out a short groan. "Oof."

The intruder twisted Wolf's arm, depriving him of his knife, and then smoothly transitioned into knocking Wolf onto the floor. He held his knife right against Wolf's carotid artery.



It was over. The intruder had won.

Wolf was one of the Khuer. He was a doctor by trade, not a mercenary or knight. But he had survived fighting against the pirates on the ship, so he couldn't have been a pushover. And yet, the intruder had defeated him without taking so much as a scratch, without missing a breath.

I don't think Wolf lost because he was weak... No, the intruder is just that strong.

Squirming a little, Wolf said, "Who are—"

"Don't move," the intruder ordered curtly. "Move again and you're dead."

Dead. I paled at the sound of that word. My heart nearly leaped out of my chest. A drop of cold sweat rolled down my temple.

What now? What should I do? I didn't want Wolf to be killed, but I also didn't want to die. The only person freely able to move and face this overwhelmingly powerful intruder was me, a lone shut-in princess. *What could I possibly do to avoid certain defeat? To get out of this with both of us still breathing?*

Think! Do I have any trump cards on hand that I can play? The intruder isn't in any rush to kill Wolf. He probably doesn't plan to kill me immediately either. So...he aims to apprehend one of us...? Or to pump us for some information? If so, then there's a fifty percent chance that I can use my own life as leverage.

I cast my eyes around the room. Wolf's dropped knife was lying on the floor a short distance away. *Will I be able to distract him, at least a little, if I threaten to harm myself? Or if I run away? But those tricks will only have an effect if I'm the intruder's target. And if he is after me, he might kill Wolf to make chasing me easier.*

"You stay put too," the intruder commanded me. It seemed that he'd realized I was planning to flee.

Reflexively, I raised my head when he called out to me. I saw the intruder's hood slip off, and wavy black hair spilled over his face. Through the gaps in his hair, I could see red eyes decorated by long eyelashes.

Those eyes... I got a languid impression from him, probably because of the

look in his eyes... They made him seem like a drowsy cat. His expression betrayed no sense of emergency, despite the fact that the slightest slip of his hand would rob someone of their life.

My mouth hung open as I watched him, and I suddenly recalled the memory of a man's voice playing inside my head: "So tiresome." That man had drowsy-looking eyes, a drowsy-looking face, and he'd say that expression over and over like it was his catchphrase. The figure in front of me exactly matched the image of a man I'd seen once before.

"Crow...?" The name slipped off my tongue, and the intruder's eyes went round.

Spying his chance, Wolf seized the intruder's arm and headbutted him in the jaw. "Take that!"

"Argh!"

The blow sounded painful. As the knife dropped from the intruder's hand, Wolf grabbed his collar, wrestled him onto the floor, and then sat on top of him. He then thrust the knife toward the intruder's throat.

"The tables have turned. Not so strong now, eh?" Wolf laughed wildly, baring his canines. "Now, how should I cook this meal?" From atop the intruder, Wolf twisted his lips into a smile. His face was naturally fierce, so the expression he wore now made him look rather villainous. Honestly, I wasn't sure which of them was the bad guy.

In contrast, the intruder was lying still, not putting up any resistance. The drowsiness was still present on his face, but I thought that I could sense a hint of disappointment in the slight lowering of his brows. However, to me, the emotion seemed to be directed at himself for dropping his guard, rather than at Wolf.

Seeing this triggered my memories, and in my mind, I heard a familiar voice saying, "*What am I playing at?*"

That's right...

I heard him say that... In. The. Game.

I took a fresh look at the intruder, inspecting him from head to toe. He had wavy black hair, short at the back of his head but comparably long in front. His eyes were distinctive, their color like a sea of red paint with a drop of charcoal mixed in, and they lay beneath shadows cast by long eyelashes, which were spine-chillingly sexy.

“Argh, this is the worst,” the intruder muttered languidly in a sweet tenor voice.

My hazy recollections gradually grew clearer. I pieced together fragments of once-seen images, took another look at the man in front of me, and I became certain—this was the same person. It really was Crow.

He was Crow the assassin, one of the main characters in the otome game *Welcome to the Hidden World* and the only suitor character I had yet to meet. His age had never been revealed, but I pegged him as being in his midtwenties at the start of the game.

He was a tall, slender, handsome young man who exuded an air of immorality. He’d amassed immense popularity with fans before the game’s launch, hailed as the creation’s resident lover boy. Why? Solely because his looks had captured the hearts of fans.

However, as more information about him surfaced following the game’s launch, his reception soured. The cause of this shift was the same as it was for every other suitor character: the audience discovered the inflammatory revelation of his hidden personality.

In his case, it was because he was gay, i.e., only interested in other men. I wouldn’t normally comment on other people’s sexuality, but it was a little too contrived for a suitor character in an otome game.

How am I supposed to romance this guy when there’s this massive barrier in the way?! I’m the wrong gender! I’d thought at the time. This is beyond ridiculous. Get real.

Wolf yanked Crow by the collar and brought their faces close together. He thrust the tip of the knife close to Crow’s neck, and then began an interrogation. “So, who are you? Who told you to come after us?”

I was interested in finding out as well, so I pricked my ears up, momentarily putting a pause on rummaging through my memories.

“You were on that ship,” Wolf stated. “You’re the one that relinquished his cabin when that spoiled noble brat’s maid collapsed.”

At last, Wolf’s words triggered my recollection.

That’s it! He’s the one that switched rooms for Mia...the one I thought might be a member of the Khuer because he was always wearing that hood.

So, I was sharing living space with an assassin... Yikes. It’s a wonder I’m still breathing. That’ll teach me to be so careless.

Wolf continued questioning him. “When you fought together with us against the pirates, was that just because we had a common enemy?”

Crow said nothing though. His lips were sealed, and he looked annoyed.

Is it the look of a man willing to prioritize his contract over his own life, one befitting a professional...? No, I don’t think it’s anything that cool. In fact, maybe I’m imagining things, but Crow looks pissed.

Although perhaps not the best way to describe an older man, his handsome face was currently scrunched up like a petulant child’s.

“Not gonna talk?” Wolf let out a sigh that was heavy with exasperation. He raised his head, and simultaneously, Crow’s foot moved slightly.

I only caught that motion because I was watching from a distance; Wolf was too close to spot it. Crow knocked the heel of his boot against the floor and a blade emerged from the toe of his boot. I gasped.

I’ve seen this trick in a film before... But now’s not the time to marvel at that!

“Watch out!!!” I screamed before Crow’s leg shot up.

Wolf reacted immediately and jumped off Crow. Now free, Crow nimbly leaped to his feet and backed a few steps away from Wolf. I prepared myself to watch a renewal of the close-range fighting, but instead, Crow charged toward me.

So I am the target?!

Crow flung his arm around my chest, scooping me up as though to steal me away.

Being carried like this is starting to get old!!! And I hate that I'm growing accustomed to being carted around like furniture!

Crow kicked the door down and darted outside. The merciless rain soaked my body.

"Maryyy!!!" Wolf shouted my name with a panicked look on his face.

"Wolf!" I reached out for his hand.

I have no idea who's on my side and who's an enemy, but I feel safer trusting Wolf than I do Crow.

"Let me go!!!" I pounded on Crow's back with my fist, but it seemed like he didn't even feel it. He looked thin, but his body was well toned. With my strength, I wouldn't be able to give him so much as a bruise.

However, Crow did react to my punch with a frustrated *tut*. "You really are a pain, you know that?"

"Huh?"

"Which of us abducted you, eh? Maybe I *shouldn't* have rescued you, Princess."

After a brief pause, I asked, "Rescue?"

"That's right," he declared unenthusiastically. "I'm your rescue party. Got it?"

I was stunned and had trouble processing what he was saying. *It does seem a bit strange for me to ask Wolf for help when he's the one that abducted me first... But does that mean Crow's on my side?*

"That can't be!" I denied impulsively.

"Why's that?" Crow's voice was a tone lower than it had been. It was intimidating, and I felt that "you brat" would be the next words out of his mouth.

"I-I-I mean... You don't have any reason to rescue me!" I screamed.

Crow fell silent. "His Majesty didn't tell you about me?"

That question had come out of nowhere, and I was at a loss for an immediate reply. “Huh? What’s that supposed to...” *His Majesty? Whose Majesty would that be? Not my father, surely...?*

While I struggled to answer his question, I heard Wolf’s voice shouting after us. Hearing him desperately call my name, I raised my head.

After a few seconds of silence, Crow spoke again. “Princess, I’m gonna ask you some questions and I want short answers.”

“Um?”

“Is the man following us an enemy that you need me to take out?”

“No!” I wasted no time in refusing. My answer wouldn’t have come as quickly if Crow had asked me whether Wolf was on my side—although I couldn’t imagine that he meant any harm, Wolf’s motivation for kidnapping me was still unclear. But, at any rate, he wasn’t an enemy to be taken out. Definitely not. I didn’t want him to die.

“Do you want to flee back to Nevel,” Crow continued, “or do you want to have a chat with the doctor?”

“Th-The second one!”

“Okay.” Crow accepted my choice and came to a halt.

Wolf caught up and seemed startled that we weren’t on the move. Perhaps wary of a trap, he stopped a bit farther away from us than normal conversational distance.

“Wolf K. Lucker,” said Crow.

“What?” Wolf asked, looking suspiciously at Crow for using his full name.

“Are you the princess’s enemy?”

Wolf’s eyes grew wide with surprise, but he immediately stiffened his expression and shook his head. “No... It might be hard to believe, coming from the man that kidnapped Mary, but I would never hurt her.”

“Hmm,” Crow responded without enthusiasm. He looked me in the eyes and asked, “What now, Princess? Do we believe him?”

He'd left the choice up to me, but it felt more like a test. I nodded in spite of my internal disarray.

Then, Crow lowered me onto the ground. "Heavier than you look," he muttered casually.

Although I didn't show it on the outside, his offhand comment gave me a shock. *Where does this bird get off?!* I yelled in my mind. "Wait a second..." All of a sudden, it clicked.

Bird...? Ah! I can remember a certain somebody making a show of using that word.

Bird. His Majesty. Rescue. An answer that linked those three words together popped into my mind.

"Are you...my father's 'bird'?" I asked, overcome with surprise.

Crow rolled his eyes. "You're just realizing that now?"

I had a feeling that he was indirectly insulting me as slow-witted. But I had far more important things to do than dwell on that feeling.

Crow is my father's "bird"? That's not how it played out in the game... What's going on?

"I sent the noble twerp a letter."

After we returned to the deserted building, Crow shook his head, sending raindrops flying from his black hair. As I watched him, I had the impolite thought that he looked like a dog drying itself.

"Noble twerp...?" I asked.

Crow sat down at the hearth opposite me and answered, "The marquis's son. Better to let him know you're okay, unless you want him to turn Flanmer upside down looking for you."

Come to think of it, George did mention that a bird had brought him a letter, and that's why he rushed over to the port town. If Crow had sent that message too, then everything fits...more or less.

“Thank you.” My face probably didn’t look especially grateful since I wasn’t entirely sure about him yet.

Peering at me, Crow’s eyes widened slightly. He stared at me intently, making me feel extremely uncomfortable.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Just surprised that you’re thanking me even though you still don’t quite trust me.” Crow looked at me like he was examining a rare animal, and I let out a little groan.

I wasn’t convinced that Crow was on my side, but I knew that didn’t excuse my behavior. If he truly was my father’s bird, that would mean my behavior had been far too rude. After all, I was in his debt on several counts.

“Sorry.” I lowered my head, feeling guilty. A crude, childish apology was all that I had to offer.

Crow’s eyes grew wider still. “And, on top of that, now you’re apologizing,” he muttered, utterly astonished. “Are you *really* royalty?”

Wolf answered for me. “Expecting Mary to act like a royal is a waste of your time. She can be majestic when she wants, but you won’t see a shred of that used for her own benefit. If you were watching over her on the ship, you should know that.”

“I was more...keeping tabs on her.”

Crow’s words sounded like the truth. Assigning someone to follow me for surveillance seemed like something my father would do. Keeping me safe was probably part of his role, but his main responsibility would unmistakably have been keeping my father up to speed on my actions.

Okay, given that bit of information, it seems that his story has no holes...I think. But, I’m hesitant to believe everything he says just like that.

The Crow that I knew from the game had been an assassin, not a spy—and an assassin hired by the Kingdom of Lapter to kill the shrine maiden, no less. What in the world had happened? He’d gone from being a foreign enemy’s hired killer to spying in the service of Nevel. What radical shift had taken place behind my

back? There were questions and mysteries in abundance.

But, even if I assumed that Lapter had hired Crow as an assassin...I couldn't imagine why I'd be on their hit list, and I couldn't see Lapter targeting a princess who had no particularly remarkable skills or abilities. And why would he go to the trouble of convincing me that he was a friend when he could've just snatched me up or killed me? The more realistic conclusion was that Crow had become a spy for Nevel in a deviation from the game's plot.

While staring at Crow's face from the side, I made my decision. *Okay, I'm gonna trust him for now and see where it gets me.*

"Well, whatever," Crow said. "Anyway, Princess, weren't you gonna hear this guy out?"

His prompting reminded me. *Oh, yeah, that's right. I still don't know what Crow is up to, but I haven't found out what Wolf is after either.*

I glanced toward Wolf, who was throwing wood onto the fire, and his hands stopped.

"I haven't told you what I want yet, have I?" asked Wolf.

"No. Why did you kidnap me?"

The flames illuminated Wolf's face as it first scrunched up and then formed a bitter smile. "Come to think of it, I haven't properly introduced myself to you yet."

"Huh? No, you did. When we met—"

Ignoring my confused reaction, Wolf suddenly knelt before me. "I'm the next chief of the Khuer tribe, Wolf Khuer Lucker. It is my greatest pleasure to make your acquaintance, Your Highness."

"Uhhh... What?!"

Wolf had surprised me when he'd bowed his head and begun his reverent self-introduction, but that shock was just the beginning; it couldn't compare to the astonishment I felt when I registered what he'd said.

The next chief...? Who is? Wolf?! Get out of here!

While I was struggling to accept reality, Crow's muttering voice slid into my ear. "You've gone and hooked quite the big fish here."

"A-Are you really?" I asked Wolf.

"Really." He nodded, his face extremely sober.

I had no idea how to respond.

It's miraculous enough to run into one of the Khuer, but just how lucky am I to snag the future chief? I wanna check my status card. I bet all the points that should've been divided between my strength, intelligence, dexterity, and everything else have gone into maxing out my luck stat instead.

My mind started to wander in an effort to delay facing reality, but I forced my brain back to work and concentrated on listening to Wolf.

"Do you remember when I told you that I was looking for Nevel's goddess?" he asked.

"Yes. Although you didn't say why."

"To find a bride."

"Huh?"

What did he just say? A bride? Who is? And whose bride is she supposed to be?

"You want the goddess as a bride?" Crow sniggered. "So you're saying you wanna propose to the princess? Clearly, it's not her womanly charms you're after."

This bird really does need to learn a thing or two about manners! Sure, I don't have any "womanly charms"! And I doubt that becoming an adult will make a lick of difference on that front! But still, there are some things you just don't say, even if it's the truth!!! Oh, Crow, look at what you've got me thinking about myself... Somebody kill me.

"It's all right, Mary," said Wolf. "I'm not going to make you my bride."

Oh, it's all right, is it?! I am planning to become Sir Leonhart's wife, so, you know, that does work out for me. I'm fine with it! But you do realize you're

rubbing salt in the wound of my already bruised confidence, right?!

My womanly pride was in tatters. *God, please smite these assholes.*

I let out a hollow laugh, my face drawn, but the conversation proceeded without me. According to Wolf, he'd hoped to marry the goddess to spur on the Khuer tribe's development. He'd probably hoped to further improve their techniques by incorporating outside knowledge.

But when he'd actually met the goddess from the rumors, she'd turned out to be flagrantly unsexy, so he'd scrapped the idea. No, sorry, it was because I was a princess. Yeah, that was it, definitely. Hey, you, don't give me that pitying look!

"You are cute, Mary," said Wolf, "but you're so much more than just a pretty bride."

"Huh?" My head had sunk, but he took me by surprise and I raised it back up. He was staring directly at me and our eyes met. His gaze was frighteningly serious. "Wolf...?"

"Listen, Mary. I know I'm biased, but I think the Khuer tribe is a bargain purchase. We can make medicines you won't find elsewhere because of our vast wealth of knowledge, and we're well trained at patching people up. A lot of us are shy and stubborn and narrow-minded, but that's all part of the fun once you get to know us."

"R-Right..."

It seems a little off to use the phrase "bargain purchase" to describe what people praise as "the miraculous tribe." His lighthearted tone makes it hard to figure out how to reply.

Actually, let's take a step back and ask: what's he getting at?

I watched Wolf suspiciously, unable to see where he was going with this. Crow, in contrast, wore an expression that was equal parts surprise and exasperation.

"I'm aware of how amazing the Khuer tribe's techniques and stores of knowledge are," I said. "As it happens, that was my purpose for traveling all the

way to Flanmer in the first place—I wanted to buy medicine from your tribe to fight off a tropical disease.”

“Oh, that’s convenient,” remarked Wolf.

What, is he gonna sell it to me? His attitude seemed far more promising than I’d expected, and my eyes lit up. *I thought their exclusionary nature, which I’ve heard so much about, would mean I’d need to make a hard pitch.*

“While you’re at it, why not hire the whole Khuer tribe?” he asked.

“Huh?”

Wolf watched me blink in amazement, and he smiled his sweetest smile.

“Rosemary von Velfalt, please become our tribe’s master.”

My brain stopped functioning and my voice escaped in a silly squeal. “Sorry?”

The Marquis's Son Frets

"No good. I can't find her anywhere," a sailor huffed, out of breath. He'd been the last one to return, and the anxious look on his face spread to everyone in the room. Every stone in the mansion had been upturned, and groups had been sent to search the garden and the town, but nobody had caught sight of Lady Mary.

Uneasiness welled up inside me, and I bit down on my lip. I peered outside the window, but the world was already hidden behind the veil of night.

She must be so worried about what'll happen to her in that darkness. Is she frightened? Is she cold? Is she having a hard time?

I was restless with those thoughts.

A woman was mumbling, her voice spiked with worry and her face pale. "Oh, Mary... Where could you have gone?" This was Michael's older sister, Bianca.

Michael was standing by her side and had one arm around her back, holding her up. "It'll be all right, Bianca."

"But Michael! Mary wouldn't do this to us on purpose. She's not the kind of girl who could... Something must have happened to her."

"I think so too... She wouldn't do this for no good reason," said one of the sailors—Paul, his name was. "We'd better assume that she either found herself caught up in something unexpected...or somebody's kidnapped her. You, the noble boy, shouldn't you call for a rescue party?"

I—George zu Eigel—met Paul's suggestion with silence. Like the others, I found it hard to imagine that Lady Mary had disappeared intentionally. The most plausible scenarios were either that she'd become embroiled in some incident or that she'd been abducted.

But that left one question: who had abducted her?

"The man that was with her... He hasn't turned up yet either?" I asked.

“No,” Paul answered, his expression grim.

Bianca and the rest of the sailors looked conflicted. The man named Wolf, who’d been at Lady Mary’s side, had apparently won their trust.

“A search for Her Highness will become quite a serious incident,” I said. “If we report her disappearance, then this Wolf person will likely become wanted as the prime suspect in the abduction of a princess.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Bianca cried. “Wolf can’t be the culprit!”

“Yet, he was the only one with her when she went missing,” I rebutted. “Moreover, he is nowhere to be found, which is more than enough circumstantial evidence for the charge to be considered.”

“But...” Bianca’s reply petered out and she cast her head down.

“There were no signs of a struggle inside her room,” I continued. “Other than a broken vase, everything was still neat and tidy. It’s one thing to kidnap an unconscious girl, but it would be far too unnatural to think that Wolf would let himself be abducted at the same time without putting up a fight.”

Still, the sailors rallied in support of the man named Wolf.

“But he was so fond of her,” one argued. “And I’m sure that was genuine.”

“I agree,” another piped up. “He treated her like she was his little sister or his daughter. I can’t imagine him hurting her.”

Their insistence irritated me. I felt like snarling and saying, “*Then who did abduct her? Go on, tell me!*”

“So, you’re certain that he is entirely uninvolved?” I asked.

All mouths clamped shut after I spoke, and a grave silence enveloped the room.

I was not familiar with Wolf, and I hadn’t shared those days aboard the ship with him like the sailors had. As such, the dilemma they were facing was incomprehensible to me.

But at the same time, that allowed me to view matters from a different angle. Both the mansion and the town outside were crowded with people; it wouldn’t

be possible to sneak inside and abduct not just Lady Mary but a large, strong man as well, all without being detected. There was only one conclusion that I could draw—Wolf was either the kidnapper himself or had aided in the abduction.

Personal feelings shouldn't overturn that logical conclusion. I wouldn't let them.

If that man did kidnap Lady Mary, then that means he betrayed the trust she placed in him. I'll make him pay for that, mark my words!

"George..." murmured a concerned voice. I simultaneously felt a gentle tap on my shoulder. Michael was standing before me, staring at me with a sad look in his eyes. I hadn't even noticed him walk over. Since he wasn't a person who was confident with words, he appeared to be struggling to decide what to say, but I nonetheless understood that he was worried about me.

It seemed that the sailors weren't the only ones acting without composure; I was behaving in the same way.

I exhaled deeply, releasing my seething anger. As I took the cool air into my lungs, the heat of my temper dissipated slightly.

"We're all worried about the princess," said Michael. "All of us."

"You're right," I conceded. "I'm sorry." I put on a bitter smile.

Paul awkwardly scratched his head. "We should be apologizing too. You were giving this serious thought, but our feelings got in the way and we shot your ideas down."

"No, I was getting worked up as well," I said. "My apologies."

Though it was still a little awkward, the mood in the air had become substantially less volatile.

"Before anything, let's figure out what we know. Does anyone have a map?" I asked. "An understanding of the local geography would allow us to narrow down the possibilities and maybe pinpoint the direction that Her Highness's kidnapper went."

One of the sailors raised a hand. "I think I have one in my bag... I'll go get it."

The bag must've been in another room because he started walking toward this room's entrance. However, as soon as he opened the door and stepped across the threshold, he yelped in surprise and came back in, walking backward.

"What is it?" asked Paul.

Simultaneously, another person placed one foot inside the room. I, along with everyone else, let out a gasp when we saw who it was.

The man stumbled inside. His body swayed tremendously, and with a forceful *thump*, he rested his back against the wall by the door. He'd thrown a coat over his shoulders without putting his arms through, and his chest was wrapped in bandages that were speckled with blood. He was clearly in no fit state to be on his feet. However, his eyes, if nothing else, were alive with passion. They looked as keen as those of a wounded beast.

"Where...is Lady Rosemary?" he rasped. This was Klaus von Behlmer.

Bianca and Michael rushed over to him, panicked.

"Klaus!" Bianca cried. "You got out of bed with your body in that state?!"

"St-Stop!" Michael exclaimed. "Your wounds need more time to fully close up!"

They tried to lend him their arms to help him stand, but he waved them away.

"I'm fine," Sir Behlmer said. "Don't worry about me. More importantly, where is Lady Rosemary?"

Bianca and Michael both fell silent. I wouldn't have asked them to forget their honest dispositions or to smile and lie to him, but I would've preferred if they'd tried a little harder... They were just so obvious. I heaved a mental sigh and focused my eyes on Sir Behlmer, whose expression had grown even more severe.

He shot me a piercing look right back. "You said 'Her Highness's kidnapper,' did you not?"

Hearing the growl in his voice, I realized my blunder—he must've overheard our conversation a minute ago. I'd been too hasty in blaming Bianca and Michael because I was, in fact, the one responsible.

“Has somebody kidnapped Her Highness?” Sir Behlmer asked. “Who? Where is she?”

After a pause, I replied, “If you were listening, then you know we aren’t sure who’s behind this or where they went. It’s not even certain that she *has* been kidnapped.”

“But she is gone. That much is true!” Sir Behlmer yelled. His face contorted with rage and he struck the wall with his fist in anger. The impact caused one of his wounds to reopen, and the bandage that was tied around the back of his left hand bloomed red.

Turning pale, Michael hurriedly took hold of Sir Behlmer’s arm. “Go back and rest! Your body isn’t ready to be up and about yet!”

However, Sir Behlmer brushed Michael’s hand off, pushed himself from the wall, and began to limp away.

“Hey! Where do you think you’re going?” Bianca asked, sounding shocked.

“To look for Her Highness.”

“In *your* state?! Don’t be ridiculous! You’ll just end up dead in some ditch!”

The sailors then joined Bianca in trying to persuade him. “She’s right, Sir,” said one. “You barely survived those wounds as it is.”

“Look at that, your stitches are coming undone!” remarked another. “Get back to your bed and lie down, for crying out loud!”

However, Sir Behlmer was deaf to their pleas. “I am Her Highness’s guard. Who but me will look for her?”

“We will!” argued a sailor.

“It’s not my will to entrust Lady Rosemary to anyone else.”

“You’re stubborn, I’ll give you that!” the sailor retorted.

Several sailors grappled with Sir Behlmer in a desperate bid to stop him. However, he shook them all off and headed toward the door. How he had the energy left to do this when his whole body was covered in cuts and bruises, I didn’t know. I wasn’t sure whether to be appalled or impressed.

“What are we gonna tell the princess if anything happens to you?! Please, just go back to bed and stop making a fuss!” demanded a sailor.

“Yeah?! While I was lying in bed like an idiot, Lady Rosemary went missing! How can I just lie around?!”

“And if you go out there before you’re ready, you’ll die, and then what will the point have been?!”

“My life belongs to Lady Rosemary! If I don’t use it now, while she’s in danger, then just when am I ever going to use it?!” Sir Behlmer was screaming, as though he were wringing his voice out from deep within his body. Anger and irritation showed on his face, but more than that, he looked fiercely regretful.

Bianca had been startled by his outburst, but her face soon flushed angrily. Her slender arms and her clenched fists were trembling. “Klaus... How dare you say...!”

However, it was Michael, standing next to her, who moved first. Michael ran over to block Klaus’s path, and all eyes focused on him. Everyone watched with bated breath to see what would happen, and the next moment, we became witnesses to an extraordinary sight.

“Oof?!”

Michael clenched his fist and plunged it into Sir Behlmer’s cheek.

That bears repeating: Michael punched Sir Behlmer.

And...he hadn’t held back any of his strength. Michael was a sorcerer, so a punch of his couldn’t be particularly strong. Yet, the shock it delivered was immeasurable—that is, the mental shock.

All of us froze in place with our mouths hanging open. Even Michael’s own sister was no exception; she was just as stunned as everyone else. Michael’s hand had reddened where he’d punched Sir Behlmer. He gave it a little shake and then crudely ran it through his hair, pushing the strands back and revealing eyes that were burning with rage.

“Cut the shit!” Michael’s voice was a deep, husky growl. It sounded like he was trying as hard as he could to hold back his immense anger. “You weren’t

saved by some miracle. No, *people* and their hard work saved you. You're here now because of the people on the ship, because the princess stopped at nothing to keep you alive. And now you're going to throw that precious life away so you can feel better about yourself?!"

Sir Behlmer gasped. His green eyes opened wide, and the fierce rage that had dwelt within them a moment ago extinguished.

"Do you have any idea how many times she called your name?! How much she cried for you?! After all the care she's shown you, why...?" Michael's face crumpled.

"Michael..." Bianca gently placed her arms around her brother's shoulders.

His head sank, as though to hide his watery eyes from sight. He sniveled, and then I heard him quietly mumble, "Sorry for losing my temper."

After a long moment of stunned silence, Sir Behlmer lowered his head down as well, putting a hand on his battered cheek. "No, it's fine," he said.

I didn't manage to respond to either Michael or Sir Behlmer. Frankly, I didn't know what to say.

Michael was right to be angry since Sir Behlmer was abusing the life that Lady Mary and everyone else had tried so hard to save.

But I could also sympathize somewhat with how Sir Behlmer felt. He'd failed to protect someone dear to him despite being right next to her. The regret and fury that he was experiencing must've been indescribable...especially since he had no idea what perils she was currently facing.

When I imagined all the terrible things that might be happening to her, I felt like I'd lose my mind. My fists clenched even more tightly at the thought.

The room was shrouded in an awkward silence. But then, it was suddenly broken by a small clunking noise. I glanced around the room, searching for the source of the sound, and then I heard it again.

"A bird?" Bianca tilted her head, looking puzzled.

Following her line of sight, I glanced over my shoulder. Beyond the window was a bird with plumage as black as the night sky behind it. Its head was cocked,

and it was pecking at the glass with its beak.

I'd seen this bird before...and recently.

"Don't tell me..." I immediately rushed over to the window.

Just as I'd anticipated, there was a rolled-up letter fastened to the bird's leg.

The Personal Guard in Anguish

With the help of some sailors, I returned to my room.

The boy named Michael diligently changed my bandages. He didn't say a word, perhaps feeling awkward about punching me.

As if to make up for the silence, his sister Bianca chatted my ears off. "Use the bell to call us if you feel unwell." When I didn't reply, she continued, "Hellooo? Are you listening, Klaus?"

"Yeah..."

She prepared a pitcher of water, a glass, and a bell to call for help, all the while nagging me with her instructions. When Michael was done treating me, Bianca put her hands on his back and shuffled off toward the door.

Before exiting the room, she looked around just once, then warned me, "Don't get up for the time being. Got it?"

Although I felt conflicted about taking advantage of her kindness, to be honest, I was grateful to be left alone; I didn't want anyone to see how depressed I was.

I was sitting on the bed, and I fell backward, letting gravity pull me down. The mattress let out a silly-sounding noise as my body sank into it, and even an impact that minor was enough to severely aggravate the wounds on my back. The injuries were barely closed, and the slightest movement sent powerful waves of pain radiating through my body.

I puffed, trying to expel my agony. It would be better for my body if I were to lie facedown—I knew that—but I couldn't muster the energy to sit back up. Instead, I just pressed the back of my hand against my temple and shut my eyes.

I was so embarrassed and so disappointed in myself. I wanted to disappear.

Lady Rosemary allowed me to accompany her on this journey, but have I

managed to do anything at all worthwhile? Looking back, I feel like I've been holding her up at every turn.

Not only had I held Lady Rosemary back by getting injured, but I'd also failed to notice that she'd been kidnapped because I'd been unconscious. If anything happened to her, I'd never be able to forgive myself.

"Lady Rosemary..." I whispered the name of that person so dear to my heart.

According to the report delivered by the bird to the son of Marquis Eigel, Lady Rosemary was unharmed. The message didn't go into specifics, but it did guarantee her safety. I imagined that a guard was with her, sent by either His Majesty or Prince Christoph. Before, I would've flown into a rage, furious that I wasn't the one by her side. But now, I only felt relief. Her life was too precious to entrust to a man as pathetic as me.

What I found most unbelievable right now was how I'd acted earlier. I'd lacked the strength to protect her as her guard, and I'd been so immature as to lash out toward everyone around me, ignoring my own shortcomings. I felt ashamed of all of it.

Why hadn't I devoted every minute to training like my life depended on it? Why had I settled for the meager skills I possessed? I'd found a wonderful person to serve, but I'd been too busy rejoicing at my good fortune to spare a thought for anything else. I'd failed to realize that I wasn't fit to be her guard. No, I was too foolish to even contemplate that idea.

My chest felt tight. I could barely gasp for air. When I wondered how Lady Rosemary felt about me, the very thought almost made me forget how to breathe.

The princess was a kind person. She could be a little curt at times, but that was only a facade—she would never say anything that would truly hurt me. She'd probably keep me around even if I were utterly useless.

But... But what if...she doesn't need me? What if she thinks she's better off without me?

"Lady Rosemary... I..."

Even though there was no change in my desire to serve that special person,

my one and only master, for the rest of my life... For the first time ever, the thought of being in her presence terrified me.

The Second Prince Mingles

My way forward was obstructed by a garden maze of topiary trees pruned into complex shapes. A view from above would probably reveal the beautiful patterns of the sculpted trees, but from ground level, they were nothing more than obstructive obstacles. I walked on while entertaining thoughts that would probably give the gardener an anger-induced heart attack.

“It’s a nightmare walking through all these twists and turns. I don’t know if it’s supposed to be *art*, but whatever happened to just making single, straight paths? And how are we supposed to marvel at the design down here when it was constructed with the intention of being viewed from above? All it does is get in the way.”

I’d chosen to keep those exact comments to myself, but they were given voice by the person next to me, with many times more hostility than what I’d felt. The sour-faced boy standing by my side looked to me for agreement. “I don’t for the life of me understand artists. What about you, Johan?”

He was a head shorter than me, with a slim body that was bordering on too skinny, but what he lacked in size he made up for in attitude. His face had nothing out of place but still looked resoundingly plain. His hair and eyes were an unremarkable light brown, which was the most common color in the Kingdom of Vint. His looks were so average that he could’ve vanished among the crowds on the city streets, perhaps never to be found again. However, the haughty expression on his face negated any averageness. He was just twelve years old, and yet, his attitude and expression were reminiscent of a grumpy old man.

This was Nacht von Ersta—the second prince of the Kingdom of Vint.

“Personally, I agree with you,” I said, “but I suspect that we’re in the minority. In fact, your brother and the princess appear to be having a great time.” I put on a bitter smile and pointed with my eyes to the pair in front of us.

Beyond the twisting hedge corridor, two people were chatting intimately.

One of them was a tall, well-built young man. He had distinct double-edged eyelids, handsome eyebrows, a straight nose, and altogether a gorgeous face. His smooth, neat hair and his eyes were both the same color as Nacht's, but they appeared brighter, perhaps thanks to the friendly smile that he wore. He was the one that the common people called the "Prince of Light": the well-loved first prince of the Kingdom of Vint, Licht von Ersta.

"See that unconcerned look on his face?" Nacht muttered. "Doesn't he spend enough time with women already? It's practically every day. His womanizing ways will be the death of him."

Incidentally, the boy sighing loudly by my side was the owner of the complementary nickname the "Prince of Darkness." Well...not really. The actual nickname I'd heard used in the city was "Prince Grouchy." *It fits*, I'd thought.

Although I sincerely wanted to express my agreement with Nacht, I suppressed that feeling and submitted a more neutral opinion. "The fault doesn't lie solely with your brother. He's so handsome that women will naturally flock to him."

Nacht's eyes widened a bit and he stared at me fixedly. After a few seconds, he pulled a very strange face. "That sounds sarcastic coming from you."

"Does it?"

"Of course it does. My brother has quite the handsome face, but put him next to you, and he's clearly a step down. That's abundantly clear—every maid and noble girl in the palace is crazy for you."

The sardonic prince was complimenting me, but it would be foolish for me to openly agree with him. That said, humility wouldn't serve any purpose either. So, I smiled and said nothing. He looked away, seeming as though he wanted to say, "*You're no fun.*"

"Although, you haven't captured the heart of the woman who matters most," Nacht added.

"The woman who matters most?"

My sister? The first image that entered my mind was of a girl I hadn't seen for the last four years, my sister Rosemary—her bountiful, wavy platinum-blond

hair; her clear-blue eyes; her soft rosy cheeks; her flower-petal lips. Her face was prettier than the finest artist could paint, and her smile was as precious as a flower in bloom. She'd been as adorable as an angel when I'd last seen her, but I wondered how much more beautiful she'd become since. The prospect of meeting her again filled my heart with a complicated mix of excitement and fear.

"Well," Nacht continued, "Princess Julia has been trying to stay away from you, hasn't she?"

When I heard that name, I finally realized my mistake. *Of course. Anybody with a normal head on their shoulders would think me strange for assuming that the "woman who matters most" is my older sister.*

"Yes, unfortunately. I'm no match for your brother," I said in an attempt to sound outwardly modest. I didn't want him to detect even a hint of my aberrant thoughts.

But my modesty was brushed away by Nacht. He sniffed, looking exasperated. "Don't act like your relationship with her is part of some sappy love story. Perhaps that's the case with my brother, but he has muscles for brains. When I listen to your conversations with the princess, all I can hear is you two trying to outfox each other."

"Calling me a fox is one thing, but that seems an inappropriate choice of words to describe the lovely princess."

"Oh, 'the lovely princess'?" Nacht said, his voice pregnant with implication. His eyes were focused on the girl walking by the side of Prince Licht.

She was the first princess of the Kingdom of Lapter, Julia von Merkel. Her body was dainty, and her height only reached halfway up Prince Licht's chest. She had straight, black hair that matched the black quartz of her irises, and her eyes were adorned by long eyelashes. The pallor of her skin was an almost sickly white, and she looked like the sort of sequestered noble girl who'd fall to pieces after the slightest push.

She was smiling sweetly and nodding along to Prince Licht as he spoke to her enthusiastically. Looking at her, it would be impossible to see anything other than a pretty, demure young girl. However, there was more to her than met the

eye... This was evident by the cold glares she'd throw me when Prince Licht's back was turned. Although she was young and appeared frail, she fulfilled her role of princess flawlessly. She likely had a complete understanding of what was expected of her.

Nacht crossed his arms and furrowed his brows. "I wish that she'd been just a 'lovely princess.' Things wouldn't have become so troublesome."

The Kingdom of Vint had an alliance with Nevel but was on relatively friendly terms with Lapter as well. Though, that was only possible because Nevel and Lapter weren't openly at odds with each other. In the unlikely event of a war, Vint would side with Nevel. However, if that came to pass, then Vint having a princess of Lapter as their queen consort would complicate matters.

"As I see it, the ideal scenario would've been for your sister to become our queen consort and to steer my brother in the right direction."

"You jest," I said immediately, and Nacht broke into a bitter smile.

Not even funny. Why should I have to let my dear sister marry that womanizing meathead?

"My brother might be a simpleminded philanderer, but he's not a bad person. Besides, would it be so terrible for your sister if she became the queen consort of an allied nation?"

I paused for a moment. "I suppose it wouldn't."

Certainly, if I put my personal feelings to one side, I knew that Licht would have been a perfect marital choice for her. However, that would only have been the case up until a few years ago, before Vint and Lapter began to have dealings with each other. Now, if my sister beat Lapter's princess to an engagement with the crown prince of Vint, that could draw her into an unnecessary conflict. It was even conceivable that Lapter would plot to take her life to remove her from the equation.

I plastered on a fishy smile. "But I'm just a helpless boy who's not ready to let go of his older sister, so I'd rather if she stayed in our home country, if it can be helped."

"Well, I'll leave it at that for now." Nacht arched an eyebrow in displeasure,

but he didn't press the matter any further.

"Naaacht! Johaaan!" Our names were being shouted from a distance. Prince Licht was waving at us from beyond the exit of the topiary maze. "Get over here! It's time for tea!"

Oh, that's right, we came down here to the garden to have tea in the arbor. I recalled the reason for our visit to the maze while gazing at Prince Licht's cheerful, carefree smile.

I returned the wave, after which Prince Licht waved his hands in an even larger arc.

He's like a dog... Really, he isn't so bad. He just spends a bit too much time chasing after girls and doesn't quite know how to use his head.

Beside me, Nacht held his head in his hands and let out an exhausted sigh. "Look at him, not a care in the world. I'll bet that he's entirely forgotten about the planned inspection of the western region that I told him about."

"By the western region, do you mean the forest near the border with Skelluts?" I asked.

"Your deductive abilities are as unnerving as ever..."

"It makes sense since there's been a steady increase in timber exports to Flanmer. The forests in the southwest might be vast, but the raw materials aren't inexhaustible."

It might even become necessary to consider replenishing the forests by planting more trees. Moreover, the forests were home to indigenous populations, so it would be imperative to keep those people in consideration. I swallowed those suggestions though, deciding that it would be inappropriate for me to weigh in on the matter.

However, there was one piece of information that I judged Nacht should hear. "On that topic, I've heard that a disease is spreading in a town by the western border."

"What? That's news to me." Nacht's eyes widened and his voice grew hoarse. "What's your source?"

“Some merchant friends of mine. They told me that it was rare for tropical diseases to spread in the west rather than the south.”

“A tropical disease?” Nacht asked, looking troubled. “They’re not unheard of in the west... But it’d be best to keep an eye on the situation.”

Just then, Prince Licht’s cheerful voice shouted over his brother’s. “Naaacht?”

“Oh, that idiot brother of mine! This isn’t the time to be drinking tea!” Nacht fumed, although he kept his voice low.

“We’re coming!” I shouted in reply to Prince Licht, as Nacht was too busy complaining.

“Johan, give me the full details later. If possible, I’d also like to speak with those merchants directly.”

“Understood.” I nodded and then looked up.

Beyond the arbor where Prince Licht and Princess Julia were waiting for us, I could make out black clouds in the distant sky. The breeze felt humid as it brushed past my cheek.

We’re in for rain, I thought as I walked off toward the arbor.

The Reincarnated Princess's Journey

I gazed at the scenic landscape before me. As if I were trying to deny the facts of my current predicament, I muttered, "Someone tell me why I'm climbing a mountain."

"Your own choices led you here," said Crow. "Quit making a fuss and accept it."

I whined quietly, unable to come up with an argument against that logic. Both mentally and physically, I was almost out of gas. I didn't even have the energy to bite back at him.

"Want me to carry you on my back the rest of the way?" asked Crow. "I doubt you can climb much more."

"If I let you, you'll tell my father, right?"

"You betcha. I'll say, 'Your Majesty, I cradled her in my arms and let not a hair on her head fall out of place as I carried her to the top.'"

"I'll climb on my own," I shot back without pause. "I'll crawl if I have to."

Crow smiled broadly. "*Thought you'd say that,*" was the sentiment his expression conveyed. That look on his face was getting on my nerves.

Go ahead, think what you will—I know I'm easy to read. And I honestly believed I was a deadpan character... How cringey.

"I'll carry you, Mary. You are my master, after all, so I've got to treat you right."

I felt a hand on my head and looked up to find Wolf staring down at me. His gaze was affectionate, which made me feel equal parts embarrassed and uneasy.

"I haven't actually decided whether I'll become your master yet," I mumbled sulkily, my head a mishmash of conflicting emotions.

"I know that," Wolf replied without dropping his gentle smile.

I hadn't expected him to acknowledge that so easily, so I found myself at a loss for a response. *I never know what's going through Wolf's head. Not now, and not then either.*

"Please become our tribe's master."

When Wolf had asked me that back in the deserted building, I'd frozen up. The scale of the request had completely shut down my mental faculties. I'd turned into a statue incapable of response, and behind me, Crow had muttered, "Ruthless," with a mixture of surprise and pity in his voice. "How brutal. You're trying to sell the whole store to a kid who's stopped by with a few copper coins to buy a couple of bits."

He got that right.

Did Wolf truly want me to become the master of his tribe? Or did he have another objective? I still couldn't judge the true motive of his request. Although, even if it was serious, I couldn't answer so easily. It was true that I needed the Khuer's medicine and skill set, but I hadn't planned to employ the whole tribe... That seemed so far beyond my capabilities. I pondered declining his request, but I wasn't sure about that either. As has already been stated, I wanted their medicine...and as much of it as possible.

Accepting Wolf's offer seemed like the best option if I wanted to prevent the spread of disease. But I wasn't ready for the responsibility that would entail. I wasn't strong enough to handle it. As such, I'd chosen to delay my decision, fully aware of how cowardly and half-baked my choice had been.

And now I'm heading for the Khuer village while my decision is still on hold. Talk about not playing fair.

"No need to look like that," said Wolf.

I wasn't sure what face I'd been making, but I doubted that it was pretty.

Wolf's smile took on a sad appearance, and he patted my head as though to comfort me. "You were right to delay your decision. There's a lot that I haven't told you yet."

"You're right about that," Crow interrupted. "First things first—are you speaking as the next chief of the Khuer and asking on behalf of the tribe? Or is it

just your own personal wish that the princess become your tribe's master?"

Wolf's eyes widened slightly. "You're a sharp one."

Now that he mentions it, what is the rest of the tribe's opinion on this? The offer itself was so shocking that I didn't stop to wonder about that. The Khuer have always resisted taking a master so steadfastly, so would they really choose to serve someone after all this time? Even if they do, will they be satisfied with a little girl like me?

Crow and I both turned to look at Wolf.

He scratched his cheek, looking nervous. "I'm sure there's a lot you want to ask me, but for now, let's get a move on. I wanna progress a little further before dusk because we won't get a good night's sleep in this spot." Wolf kicked at a stone by his feet with his boot.

Rocks large and small covered the ground here, which left nowhere to lie down. On top of that, the area was exposed to the elements. While this spot might be fine for a short break, it wasn't ideal for spending the night.

I nodded and rose to my feet. I still wasn't entirely steady on my legs, but I had my breathing more or less under control now. *Okay, I can do this... I think.*

"Want me to carry you, Princess?" Crow teased.

I shot him a little glare. "I've already told you that I'll climb on my own, even if I have to crawl."

"You're quite the fighter." Crow laughed, amused. "And stubborn too."

"Just figuring that out now?" I shot him one more look before setting off.

I slid up against the wall of the cave and shut my eyes. The hard and damp feeling of the rock face against my cheek wasn't exactly pleasant, but I was too drained to get up again. The distant howl of a wild animal reached my weary ears.

I can't walk another step. Pathetic as it was, that was how I really felt.

I'd imagined that we would make for the peak once we'd finished our break

on the mountainside, but I'd been mistaken. The path we took had eventually begun to slope downward, and it'd led us into a forest. When the trail had entered a gentle ascent once more, the sun had begun to set. Darkness had fallen by the time we'd reached this cave.

"Mind if I touch your feet, Mary?"

"Hmm...?"

My eyelids parted slightly, and I saw that Wolf was kneeling in front of me.

Though my mind was elsewhere, he pressed on. "I'm taking your shoes off, okay?"

I nodded without really processing his words.

He removed my shoes with a respectful touch, then carefully wiped my feet with a damp cloth and applied some kind of ointment.

The cool sensation felt so good. I shut my eyes again.

"You can go right to sleep if you want."

His voice was like a mother lulling her child into slumber, and it made my eyelids feel even heavier. Even so, I shook my head in silence.

I heard a surreptitious laugh. Perhaps I'd looked like a kid trying to have her own way.

"So stubborn," Wolf whispered sweetly. "You won't let anyone carry you even when we offer, and you say that you can go on when you're barely able to stand."

I know now that I was wrong to do that. Being carried by Crow was not ideal, but there'd been no need to turn down Wolf's offer as well. But, you know, I was kinda digging my heels in... I also didn't want to make Wolf cater to me when I hadn't even given him an answer to his proposal.

"You really are willful..." murmured Wolf. "But, you've got pluck."

I knew that I'd been deadweight while climbing, which is why his compliment caught me off guard. I opened my eyes in surprise and locked onto his gaze, which shone with kindness.

Feeling suddenly uncomfortable, I changed the subject and asked where Crow had gotten to. Wolf told me that he'd left to gather wood for a fire.

"There, all done. The swelling should be mostly gone by the morning." He tapped my newly bandaged foot.

I wasn't sure what medicine he'd rubbed on my feet, but it had already begun to alleviate the pain slightly. *I wonder if it works as a painkiller and not just an anti-inflammatory?*

"It's amazing..." I mumbled to myself.

Wolf efficiently packed up the items that he'd scattered across the ground and then raised his head. "Amazing enough to want to hire us?" he asked with a playful wink.

All that I could do was return a strained smile.

After gazing at my awkward expression for a while, Wolf lowered his eyes and chuckled. "I guess it's not exactly fair of me to rush your decision when I haven't filled you in on all the details yet."

"By 'the details,' do you mean what Crow said earlier?" He'd asked whether Wolf was acting on his own personal ambitions or on his initiative as the future chief of the tribe.

Wolf nodded and then paused for a moment to think. "The answer is 'both,' I suppose. As the future chief, I think that we need to find a master, but choosing you was my personal wish."

"Of course. After all, I can't say I'm suited to the role."

A noble or a local lord would be the best fit for the tribe's sponsor. As Wolf had said before, the most desirable choice would be a wealthy person with a good conscience—a princess was too far outside the ideal candidate pool. It had probably been Wolf's personal discretion to ask me, even though I was a princess.

I'm delighted that he regards me so highly, but I don't think I have enough value to justify it.

"And this is the most important bit..." Wolf paused for a moment. He stared

at me intently, looking serious.

I sat up straight and gulped.

“This isn’t the opinion of the whole tribe.”

“Whaaat?” The word tumbled out of my mouth unbidden, sounding pathetic. “This couldn’t be worse,” I muttered.

“Guess not,” Wolf replied aloofly.

I hated how nonchalant he sounded. I could be quite shameless, but I guess he could too.

I was focused on two major concerns: First, would the people of the Khuer tribe recognize me as being a worthy employer? And second, would I be up to the task of fulfilling that role?

But now that Wolf had clarified his position, the assumption underlying everything else had been swept away. *If the tribe as a whole doesn’t want a master, then have I been fretting over this dilemma for nothing?*

“You shouldn’t make such an important decision by yourself,” I said to Wolf.

“I’ve tried to set up this discussion with my tribe many times, but the stubborn old men shoot down the idea without hearing me out.”

“So you instead will try to force their hands?” I asked. “I’m not sure about that... You might not want to hear this from an outsider, but I think that you should have given them more time.”

“We don’t *have* time. We need to act now.” Wolf’s expression seemed somehow desperate to me.

I knew that I ought to remonstrate with him, but when I saw that look on his face, I lost the ability to say anything.

“We have knowledge, and we have skills. I don’t want to waste those by holing up deep inside our mountains and doing nothing, waiting for our tribe to go extinct,” reasoned Wolf.

“Extinct...?”

“We Khuer hide in our village, deep in the mountains, and the only time we

interact with the outside world is when we venture out to sell our medicines. People say that it's difficult to find us because we're erratic in choosing which towns and villages to visit. Even so, we're not impossible to find if you wait patiently in ambush."

That seemed likely. The information from George's investigation informed us that the tribe lived somewhere along the mountain range in southeast Flanmer. If we had conducted further investigations in a nearby town or at the foot of one of those mountains, we might have encountered them.

"And well-intentioned people are not the only ones that seek us out...or come up with plans to ambush members of my tribe. In fact, unsavory characters tend to be the most cunning." As Wolf was explaining this, he loosened his collar, revealing the crisscrossing scars on his body.

When I thought about it, it did seem unnatural that a doctor like Wolf would have so many scars... I pieced together the conversational clues and reached a disquieting conclusion. My face grew pale.

"To some, our medicine is worth more than gold," declared Wolf. "You'd be surprised at the number of idiots who try to kill us to steal our medicine, and how many villains try to capture us and sell us into slavery." Then Wolf laughed and said, "Although, they get what's coming to them." His face didn't seem gloomy, but that itself spoke to the intensity of his emotional scars. "Some of my tribe want to stop leaving our mountain altogether. They want to completely isolate us from the outside world, and they argue that we don't need external income, that we can get by just growing crops and keeping to ourselves. But I think that would call into question our purpose for existing. The techniques and knowledge that our ancestors preserved and handed down to us would lose all meaning."

Wolf's eyes were burning with a powerful, dazzling light, the sort that shone when someone persevered relentlessly against an impassable obstacle. "I don't want to give up on lives that could be saved just to protect myself..." he asserted. "I don't."

It was the first time that I'd heard Wolf speaking from the heart, and it was a lot to take in.

He shot me a glance as I chewed on my lip, unable to respond, and then he lowered his eyebrows, seeming a little embarrassed. Quickly, he refastened his collar.

The awkward silence that followed was broken by Crow's impeccably timed return.

The three of us had a simple meal, and I fell asleep at some point after that. I felt guilty about not taking a turn as a lookout during the night, but thanks to the extra rest, I awoke the next morning in much better condition than before. Wolf's medicine had worked fast—the pain in my feet had largely subsided by morning.

We departed the cave at first light and progressed down a narrow path. Visibility was low due to the morning mist. I moved as quickly as I could so that I didn't lose sight of Wolf, who was walking ahead of me.

"The village'll come into sight soon," Wolf had said about an hour before.

How soon is "soon"? I whined in my mind. But at that exact moment, Wolf came to a stop. He motioned to me with his eyes, and I lined up next to him.

Before me, a small settlement appeared from within the white haze.

"Woow..."

The village sat inconspicuously between two craggy mountains. Narrow paths weaved between rows of houses built along the slopes. I could see creatures, probably cows and goats, in fenced-off locations. Beyond those sprawled vast fields.

"Is this the Khuer village?" I asked.

"Yep. My birthplace," Wolf said, and then humorously added, "Not much to do here though." His tone became slightly more serious. "Right, I'll go in first. You wait here for a bit."

"Huh? You're leaving me here?!" I exclaimed, shooting Wolf a pleading look. I was nervous about being stranded in this unfamiliar place.

He tapped my shoulder to ease my mind. "I'll send some friends to get you right away. While I work on convincing my father, I want you to hide out in that

house over there.”

I sighed with frustration. “This plan strikes me as being very hastily thrown together, spur of the moment...” Wolf just smiled aloofly, seeming entirely unfazed by my griping.

“Yeah, well, meeting you wasn’t something I’d planned either. It’s all right. I *will* come back to get you, so sit tight.”

Suddenly, a second voice spoke over Wolf’s.

“That won’t be necessary.”

Shocked, I immediately turned around and found the tip of a spear being thrust toward me, right in front of my face. Crow, who’d been walking behind us, had vanished. In his place, there was a man I’d never seen before.

Upon closer inspection, I saw that he wasn’t alone. At some point, we’d become surrounded.

“Thanks for the grand reception,” Wolf said in a low tone of voice. He hid my body behind his own.

Though the people surrounding us were likely members of the Khuer tribe, I doubted that they were Wolf’s supporters.

We seem to be in a bit of a pinch...

Unrest for the First Prince

Drip. Drop. Raindrops began to splash against the glass window. The room was silent except for the irregular patter of rain and the regular rustling of turning pages. Some might find this background noise relaxing, but right now it was doing nothing but aggravating my nerves. A man was sitting on the sofa opposite me, and watching his face only exacerbated the effect. This venue didn't help either; I didn't mind him calling me into his office during daytime, but why had he summoned me to his personal chambers in the middle of the night? Moreover, this man had his head stuck in documents and was neglecting me entirely.

I withheld my urge to heave a sigh and called out to him in a flat tone of voice. "Your Majesty."

But the man continued thumbing through documents as though he hadn't even heard me.

I'd like to measure just how thick the skin on his face is so that I can find out how he's able to ignore my entire existence without twitching a single muscle. Actually, imagining the cute faces of my siblings would be a much better use of my time than doing something so pointless.

I turned my eyes away from the king's boring visage and pointed them at the window behind me. Deciding to satisfy my cravings, I pulled up the recollections of my siblings' faces.

"Chris!"

In my mind, I saw the image of my smiling little sister calling out my name. Her grin was the childish one she'd show me occasionally, a departure from her usual precocity. The softness of her gaze and voice demonstrated her wholehearted trust in me. *Oh, how dear she is to me... My sweet Rose.*

Thinking of her quieted my frustration. I was beginning to enjoy myself, so I summoned one memory after another. The image of Rose in my mind gradually

grew more distant from the way she'd looked before she'd departed... I started to sift through the memories of her as a younger child. And in my mind, my brother, Johan, stood beside the small figure of my sister. I hadn't seen him in over four years now. He'd been growing up remarkably quickly before he'd left, and I wondered what he looked like now.

The letters that arrived regularly from him were practically just reports and they contained very few personal details. As his brother, I found that to be a little sad. I would've loved to be his confidant, the one that he turned to for advice when he suffered growing pains or found a girl he was interested in. But it seemed like there was little hope of that.

"Have you had a chance to read Johan's report?" The king finally broke the silence he'd maintained so far, and it was as if he'd read my mind.

Although I was displeased that my recollections had been interrupted, I gave a reply without emotion. "You mean the one that discusses how he'll be taking part in an inspection in western Vint?" The report had made it to me—it stated that Johan would accompany Vint's first prince on a walk through local land.

The king nodded and turned another page of the documents in his hands. "The objective is to hold a meeting with the frontier lord and conduct an audit of the southwestern forest." The king exhaled a sigh that was heavy with exasperation. "It took long enough."

He was most likely referring to the Kingdom of Vint's decision to finally conduct the inspection rather than the timeliness of Johan's report.

I felt no need to argue, as I was in agreement—Vint ought to have acted sooner.

Vint had recently opened up trade routes with Flanmer that cut through the land. As a result of this, the deforestation of Vint's sprawling southern forests had commenced at an alarming rate. Until now, the value of timber hadn't been worth the labor costs, so the forests had remained untouched...but Flanmer had become a large buyer of lumber, so the demand had increased and turned the forests into treasure troves. People had scrambled to snatch up resources to sell, devouring more and more trees by the day. In particular, the southwest forest that was nearest to Flanmer had seen a particularly rapid reduction of its

natural resources.

“Vint was exporting timber to Flanmer even before the resumption of diplomatic relations with Skelluts,” said the king. “Even a child could have told them that opening land-based trade routes would further increase demand. Vint should have imposed limits on the timber industry before this happened.” The king placed his papers on the desk and then added disinterestedly, “Too late for that though.”

“Their natural resources were so bountiful,” I said. “Vint must have thought that, given the vast size of the forests, a single person felling a single tree wouldn’t amount to any problem. Of course, they neglected to notice that a thousand—or ten thousand—people claiming resources all at once will exhaust the natural supply in the blink of an eye. Vint has troubling days ahead.”

Their course was perilous. Vint would have to negotiate with the lords of the land and bring the country’s laws in line; only then could they enact countermeasures for the deforestation. And in the meantime, trees would continue to fall, and forests would continue to shrink. The loss of forests would lead to deterioration of the soil and would impact the livelihoods of the residents. Planting trees in barren earth wouldn’t bring the forests back; it was imperative to halt the destruction while there were still forests left to save.

“First, we’ll have to see what they can convince the frontier lord to agree to,” I said. “Their success or failure will ultimately depend on how capable Prince Licht is...”

“You’re assuming that the lord will entertain them at all, which I suspect he won’t.” The king glanced down at a document on his desk.

When I saw him reach for it, I remembered that Johan’s report had mentioned something noteworthy besides the inspection and deforestation. “The disease?” I asked.

There was apparently a disease spreading in a town near the border with Skelluts in western Vint. Little was known about the illness, and even accurate estimates of the number of infected were as yet unconfirmed. The frontier lord most likely had his hands full trying to minimize the contagion.

“It is unusual for tropical diseases to spread in the west rather than the

south,” the king said. “Let us hope that it isn’t a new variety.”

“But it’s not impossible that there’s a new strain, especially if its emergence is related to the deforestation. We ought to prepare to receive a call for aid.”

“If it is a new disease, our country will have no effective medicine to treat it,” the king said frankly, and then he cupped his chin as though in thought. “On that topic, I seem to recall my daughter leaving to search for a medicine, although I don’t know what it’s supposed to be effective against.” He spoke softly and narrowed his eyes.

To me, the king seemed amused. His expression at large hadn’t changed, and he wasn’t actually smiling. But, unless I was hallucinating, I thought that I could see a faint glimmer of light in his usually cold, dull, aqua-blue eyes.

“She truly beggars belief. Always chasing fanciful leaps of logic, and yet she seems to strike at the heart of the matter,” the king said, his voice equal parts astonished and admiring.

“Are you referring to my sister...to Rosemary?”

“I am.”

“How...is...”

“How is she doing?” I tried to ask, but my voice quavered.

She was my dear sister who had departed for a distant land. Was she all right? Was she struggling? Each time my head turned to those thoughts, I suffered a sleepless night. I had no means of checking in on her since I hadn’t received permission to assign her a guard of my own. All that I could do was to pray for her safety.

The king stared at me as I gulped, and then he retrieved a document that had been placed aside. He handed the paper over to me. “This is a report.”

He didn’t specify the report’s author or its contents, but I knew immediately. My hands leaped out and snatched the report from him. Watching my unsightly display of discomposure, the king’s expression soured as though he were disgusted.

But never mind him.

My eyes darted left and right, absorbing the paragraphs of details about her time on the ship. The report was written in a matter-of-fact tone and omitted all extraneous information, but it did allow me to visualize Rose befriending and earning the trust of the sailors and her fellow passengers. I felt a lump in my throat.

However, there was one word... When my eyes fell upon it, my heart froze with fear.



“Pirates?!”

My stunned utterance was joined by the sound of someone gasping. I heard something fall to the floor behind me. When I reflexively looked over my shoulder, I saw the suddenly pale face of Leonhart. Until now, he’d been performing his duties in perfect silence, and the fact that he was shaken exacerbated my sense of fear. With a new understanding of how severe the situation was, I felt my hands begin to tremble.

My dear little sister. My irreplaceable treasure. The sweet girl that had brought vivid colors to my once monochrome world... The day will never come that I lose her, I tried to convince myself mentally, but I was too mortified to read the next line of the report.

“What an absurd amount of power she has,” the king muttered as though to himself. “I shudder to think of how many people become vulnerable when she’s involved.”

I was too fraught at that moment to properly analyze what he meant.

The king glanced at me as I sat frozen, and then he sighed. “Perhaps you intend to take a few hours to read it, but just get it read. Surely you’re aware—if she had come to any harm, I wouldn’t be flicking through reports so leisurely.”

His words implied that she was unscathed, and I felt my entire body relax. I knew that I was behaving in a pathetic and disgraceful way for someone who would one day preside over the kingdom, but my relief at that moment supplanted all else.

I heard another faint noise from behind—a sigh of relief. It hadn’t come from me.

The king’s gaze left me and instead fixed on the figure behind me. “You appear to be rather tired, don’t you?” drawled my father.

Hearing the king’s criticism, Leonhart spoke at once without making excuses. “My apologies.”

“No need to apologize. But...”

What the king said next took me several seconds to comprehend, and when my brain finally caught up, my jaw dropped.

The Reincarnated Princess Feels Uneasy

In Japanese, there's a phrase that goes "as quiet as if you had sprinkled water on the ground." It's used when a large group of people suddenly falls silent. Apparently, the origin of the phrase comes from the fact that dust doesn't rise into the air when the ground is wet.

Anyway, putting that trivia aside, I was experiencing that phenomenon right now, presently, at this very moment.

There were nine people in the room, including Wolf and myself. The space must've been over twenty square meters in area, but it felt crowded with this amount of people inside. Even though the room was packed with folks standing elbow-to-elbow, nobody said a word. I felt like I'd suffocate, and I wasn't sure whether that was for physical reasons or mental ones.

There were two to our left, two to our right, and two behind us. And then, there was one sitting on the seat of honor in front. To put it bluntly, we were surrounded on all sides.

It felt horribly uncomfortable. I wanted to run away, but I doubted I'd be able to.

The man on the seat of honor was the one to break the stifling silence. "Wolf. What are you messing around at?"

He appeared to be in his late fifties. The wrinkles on his forehead and the frown painted on his thin lips made him appear to be an ill-tempered person. He was slender. He'd combed his white hair back and looked stylish in his tribal clothing, which was similar to the traditional samue that Japanese monks wore. He exactly matched my mental image of a doctor. Though he looked completely different from Wolf, there was something similar around the eyes, which seemed remarkably familiar. I imagined that this was Wolf's father, the current chief.

He glared at Wolf, looking stern. "It's unheard of to invite an outsider into the

village. I trust that you're prepared to accept the consequences for breaking our law."

"I guess I am," Wolf replied nonchalantly. He didn't flinch even slightly at the chief's piercing glare.

The wrinkles on the chief's forehead grew deeper. "You will one day become our chief. So why have you committed such a folly?"

"If I told you that it was for the sake of the tribe, would you believe me?"

"If you want me to believe you, then first you'll have to fix that attitude of yours!" the chief barked.

Wolf shrugged his shoulders in the exaggerated way that was stereotypical of Westerners on Earth. "I've gotten used to acting like this. What's the big problem? Nobody out there would suspect that a person like me is a Khuer."

It seemed that Wolf's feminine traits existed out of a desire to disguise that he was a member of the Khuer tribe. And that strategy was indeed effective. When I'd first met him, I'd been too distracted by the gap between his appearance and his mannerisms to notice anything else. He'd been knowledgeable about medicine and was no amateur when it came to treating wounds or diseases, but I'd never suspected that he was one of the Khuer.

Occasionally, he'd spoken and acted more brusquely, which was probably him reverting to his natural mannerisms.

"Is that really so?" asked the chief.

"Hmm? What do you mean?" Wolf replied.

"Are you sure that you're not acting harmless so you can deceive a naive little girl?"

The chief turned his gaze to me, and I flinched.

Let me guess... I'm the "naive little girl."

"What an awful thing to say to your own flesh and blood," Wolf remarked.

"My flesh and blood is an idiot, and that truly pains me. Is it really your aim? You want to trick a girl this young into spending the rest of her days up here in

the mountains?”

Hmm? As I listened quietly to their conversation, I realized that it was taking a strange turn.

“She might be young,” said Wolf, “but she’s extraordinary. She knows loads about medicine and is good at treatment too. She even knows how to cure some diseases that we don’t.”

“So that’s what you’re after. The knowledge passed down by our ancestors isn’t enough for you, and you want to incorporate new knowledge from the outside world... You always have been avaricious.” The chief sighed and cradled his forehead as though he had a headache.

Members of the audience, silent until now, erupted into shouts. “Chief! Surely you’re not going to accept this?!”

“I don’t want to...but he’s brought her here now, so what else can I do?”

“Well...”

“We can’t send her back to where she came from now that she knows the location of our village,” the chief explained. “And we can’t exactly confine her to a cell for the rest of her life either.”

“But we can’t let an outsider become the future chief’s bride!” a villager protested.

Bride...?! He said bride! I knew something was up! They’re not treating me as a potential master...but as a potential wife for Wolf!!!

“And judging from her appearance, she’s not even from Flanmer!” another villager shouted. “However much Wolf might want to invest in our tribe by seeking out new knowledge and techniques, we could never insult our ancestors by mixing foreign blood into the Khuer.”

Whoa, whoa, whoa! My blood isn’t going anywhere near your tribe! My heart is set on mixing blood with the Orsein family! The thought I screamed in my mind would’ve likely sent shivers down the spines of Sir Leonhart and the Orsein family if they could’ve heard it.

I was very much freaking out.

My addled brain managed to process two facts: First, even the primary objective Wolf had for his journey—finding a bride—was a decision he'd made on his own initiative. Second, the Khuer were more exclusionary than I'd expected, and their tribe forbade allowing outsiders to enter the village, even for marital purposes.

If they hear that Wolf wants me to be the tribe's master and not his bride, I think things might get ugly...

I was frozen in place, and the tribespeople continued to shout and scream over one another. Their opinions about us were made very clear. They discussed whether to strip Wolf of his inheritance and how to deal with me, but I didn't have the courage to butt in. In fact, I opted for the opposite; I tried very hard to pretend that I wasn't in the room at all. There were enemies on all sides, and I didn't want to make a bad situation worse. After all, I had myself to look out for.

Wolf, however, displayed a stunning absence of situational awareness. "I'm not going to marry her."

I regret to say that the din of the argument failed to drown out Wolf's sonorous voice.

The room fell silent.

Hearing Wolf's statement, the tribespeople exchanged confused looks among themselves. The expressions on their faces made it clear that they didn't comprehend what he'd said.

The chief asked the question that had surely been on everyone else's lips. "What do you mean? If not, then what exactly are you planning to do with her? Marry her to someone else in the village?"

"Of course not," Wolf scoffed. "You'd need to be high class and hold a noble title to marry her. The people in this tiny village aren't cut out for it."

The room grew tense. Confusion and disarray spread like ripples on a pond.

"High class? Noble title?" The chief repeated Wolf's words, his voice deep and hushed and as fearsome as a beast's growl. The gaze he pointed at Wolf was imposing.

But Wolf was undeterred, and he twisted the corners of his lips up in a broad smile. “Yep.”

Oh God, stop! Let’s call it a day! We should’ve waited to tell them later!!! Those words thundered in my mind, but I was clutching at straws... My internal state was in contrast to Wolf, who was wearing the smile of a man who’d taken the plunge.

“You are in the presence of the first princess of the Kingdom of Nevel, Her Highness Rosemary von Velfalt.”

I heard the sound of someone expelling their breath.

The tribespeople were soon overcome with confusion.

When faced with something that exceeds their capacity to understand, people all seem to react the same way and pull the same face, I observed, trying to detach myself from the scene.

“She’s gonna be our tribe’s master.”

“Oh crap,” I whispered, looking up at the ceiling.

Wolf’s declaration had huge repercussions.

Well, duh, I thought, rather flippantly.

My presence as an outsider was anathema to these people, who’d lived their whole lives in their small community while having as little to do with the outside world as possible. Day to day, they only interacted with their fellow tribespeople. They hadn’t been willing to accept me as the future chief’s wife, so taking me as their master must’ve been unthinkable. I doubt they saw it coming!

Immediately, the room devolved into pandemonium, just pure madness. The situation grew out of hand until the chief decided to adjourn their meeting for the day.

No doubt... They’re gonna lock me away, I thought.

I was separated from Wolf and escorted to the chief’s house. The room that I

was shown into was about fifteen square meters in area. The walls were made of stone, and there was a single window high up on one wall. It was plainly furnished with a simple table, some chairs, and a bed, along with a chest that looked like a wicker trunk. In other words, it was a normal room, not a cell.

“This space is yours to use.”

I was sure that I’d been shown to the right room since the chief himself had brought me here, but I still found it odd. *Why haven’t they put me in a cell?*

“Sorry, but is this really where you want me to stay?” I asked, confused.

Facing me, the chief frowned and heaved a sigh. “I can’t very well throw the princess of a great kingdom into a cell. But I only made that decision because I have a responsibility as chief to protect this tribe. I hope you understand that you aren’t our welcome guest.”

There was a keen glint in his eyes as he gazed at me, and I stood up straight as I answered. “I do.”

“I’ll leave someone here to look after you, so talk to her if there’s anything you don’t understand.” The chief glanced over his shoulder and called to someone outside the room. “Come in, Lily.”

A petite girl entered. I thought that she must’ve been the same age as me or a little younger. She had straight, shoulder-length hair, which was deep gray in color. Her honey-colored, monolid eyes slanted up slightly at the corners. Her skin was a light brown, which I usually associated with good health... However, this didn’t appear to be true in her case—she was entirely too skinny. Her face looked impassive and she wore tribal garments that were somewhat reminiscent of traditional Japanese clothing. Altogether, this made her seem like a Japanese doll...one painted with a nontraditional palette, of course.

The chief made his exit after leaving Lily with various instructions. I didn’t move, as I was unsure what to do. Lily stood at attention by the door and seemed fixed to the spot.

The room fell into an awkward silence.

“Um... Lily?” I called out to her nervously.

She looked toward me. “Yes?” Her completely inexpressive face was intimidating.

Despite feeling unnerved, I continued trying to talk to her. “Where is Wolf?”

“In a cell,” Lily said, her voice flat and unemotional.

“A cell?!” I thought he’d just be in a different room, but nope, a cell!

That had surprised me, but perhaps it was only natural given what he’d done. Bringing an outsider to the village without consulting anyone else and then proclaiming that outsider to be the tribe’s master... He’d broken who knows how many of his tribe’s rules in the process.

“Any chance I could see him...?”

Without speaking, Lily shook her head.

My head dropped. *Guess not!*

I felt awkward just standing there with nothing to do, so I sat down on the end of the bed. I glanced toward Lily, but she was still standing at attention. I would’ve liked to chat with her and perhaps learn a thing or two about the village, but would she even answer me?

“If there’s nothing you need, then I’ll be leaving,” she stated.

“Huh?!”

“I’ll be outside, so knock on the door if you require assistance.”

She hadn’t raised her voice—in fact, she was speaking calmly and quietly, but I didn’t feel like I could butt in.

Not good! If I don’t do something, she’ll leave.

She began to move toward the door. “Until—”

“S-S-Sorry! Could we talk for a little while?!” I made a fervent appeal for her to stay, and she stopped.

She paused for a few seconds and then nodded. So far her face had been expressionless, but now she’d scrunched her brows slightly closer together. She didn’t seem pleased about being held up.

But if I let her go, I wouldn't learn anything, and I wouldn't be able to come up with a plan. I didn't know exactly what sort of plan I needed, but I did need one; holing up inside this room certainly wouldn't resolve anything.

"Please, have a seat..." I offered.

"No, I'll stand. What did you wish to discuss?"

Wow, she's not making this easy. All right, she might be making me lose heart a little bit, but I'll keep going. You won't beat me!

"I'd like you to tell me about the Khuer."

The moment the words left my lips, the atmosphere in the room grew icy. Her brows furrowed so deeply that it made the annoyed look she'd shown me earlier seem like nothing. She pursed her lips and pierced me with a glare. I got the feeling that I'd just become a clear threat in her eyes.

"Obviously, I'm not asking how you make your medicines, or what substances go into them, or anything that you're not supposed to tell outsiders. I want to know things like how your tribe was founded, and..." My voice faded to a whisper toward the end and then died out entirely.

While I was speaking, I'd remembered that the village's very existence had been kept secret, so she probably wouldn't be able to disclose even the most trivial of information to me...especially since she viewed me as an enemy. After all, she had no way of knowing what clue might help me cause trouble for them.

"I'll tell you tomorrow when I give you a tour of the village."

"Of course, I shouldn't have... Wait, what?" I'd felt dejected at first and my head had started to sink, but I flung it back up with great force.

"That's what the chief has ordered of me," Lily said, although by the look on her face, I could tell that she had her own opinion on that.

"I'll be allowed to walk around the village?" *And with commentary from a guide? What am I, a tourist?!* I was flummoxed.

"That's what the chief has decided," said Lily, again looking like she'd have made a different decision if it were up to her.

I don't understand. Not Lily—I get her. I just don't get why the chief is doing

this. He told me that I wasn't a welcome guest, so why treat me like one?

Lily exited the room while I was busy scratching my head wondering about the chief's motivations.

Left alone, I reclined and then fully collapsed onto the bed. My pose was ill-mannered for a princess, but nobody was here to witness it anyway.

There was a suspicion at the forefront of my mind, and I said it out loud. "I wonder if the Khuer have some sort of problem..."

So far, I'd simply sat back and watched, unable to keep up with the rapid speed of developing events. But now that I had some time to myself, a variety of questions sprang into my mind.

For starters, what was Wolf's real reason for wanting to make me the Khuer's master? He'd told me about bandits targeting them to steal their medicine and about the tribe's conservative faction, but was that really the whole story? It would be no exaggeration to say that Wolf's actions had been drastic. His plan had been too haphazard, even taking into consideration the fact that he'd only met me by chance. In the worst case, Wolf could suffer the penalty of being stripped of his right to become the chief.

At that moment, I recalled what Wolf had said in the cave: *"We have knowledge, and we have skills. I don't want to waste those by holing up deep inside our mountains and doing nothing, waiting for our tribe to go extinct."*

I specifically remembered that he'd used the words "go extinct." Initially, I'd assumed that he was referring to the tribe being targeted by bandits, but that couldn't be right. He'd prefaced things by saying that the Khuer were holing up inside their mountains and doing nothing, so bandits had nothing to do with the real issue. In fact, the conservative faction had suggested that they lock themselves away in the mountains precisely to *avoid* the bandits... So, why then would they still go extinct?

"The more I think about it, the less I understand."

I put my hand on my chin and shut my eyes. Exhaustion had slowed the cogs of my brain, and I had a horrible feeling like something was stuck in my throat.

Will I feel better when I learn more about the tribe on my tour tomorrow?

“Ouch?!”

Something struck me on the head. The pain caused me to jump upright, and I clutched my forehead and glanced around the room. On the bed, I spotted an acorn.

I wonder if there are oak trees nearby? When I looked up to check, my gaze locked with the eyes of a black bird that was perched on the windowsill.

“Huh...”

Why’s there a bird here? I thought, flummoxed. But then I noticed the piece of paper tied to its leg, and everything made sense.

That’s Crow’s bird!

Jumping to my feet, I reached for it with my hand. I wasn’t sure whether the bird was naturally friendly or just well trained, but instead of running away, it perched itself on my arm.

I fumbled one-handed with the seal on the message and finally managed to remove it.

Then, I opened the letter.

The Second Prince's Inspection

Nacht had been sitting in total silence, his chin resting in his hand and his elbow leaning against the carriage's window. But then, he broke the quiet atmosphere and muttered to himself, "So hot."

His brows were furrowed and he wore a deep frown. I'd grown accustomed to his bad moods, but when I peered at him more closely, I could see a hint of weariness on his face. That was only natural since he'd been stuck inside this carriage for the entire journey. His complaints suddenly rolled out, one after another, like a dam had burst. "It's hot, it's stuffy, and there's no space in here."

"Why don't you ride a horse alongside the carriage?" I suggested with a smile.

Nacht's already unhappy countenance grew even worse. "Are you kidding? I'm not going to go out and bake in the sun. I'm a royal—we spend all day lounging inside our own rooms. We can't handle the heat like the tough soldiers out there. I'd find myself dried up like a raisin in a matter of seconds."

"But your brother appears to be having a fabulous time," I pointed out.

"He's the exception."

Carriages held no excitement for Nacht's brother, Prince Licht. He'd gotten on a horse as soon as we'd left the capital and had been riding outside ever since. He seemed to have infinite stores of energy, so his choice was certainly in character, but I knew that it made his guards' lives difficult.



“Licht makes everything so much harder than it has to be. I wish he had just stayed inside this carriage with us, as a prince should... Although, then we’d have to put up with his prattling.”

What a thing to say about your own brother... I completely agree though.

Prince Licht was, to put it nicely, cheerful and boisterous...and to put it nastily, insensitive and noisy. Even Princess Julia, who took great care to please everybody, had turned down the offer to ride with him. There had been a graceful smile on her lips, but not in her eyes. *“You’re going to get me sunburned!”* Although she didn’t say that, it’d been clear to everyone that she’d been thinking it... Well, clear to everyone except Prince Licht. His imperceptiveness was both a good and a bad trait.

“It won’t be long until we’re there anyway, so I’ll let him do what he wants,” Nacht said in an offhand manner, looking resigned.

Prince Licht was traveling to conduct an inspection in Grenze, a town situated in the frontier regions near the border that was west-southwest of Vint’s capital. Accompanying him on this trip were Nacht, Princess Julia, and myself—Johan von Velfalt.

“I have to say though...the heat is staggering here,” Nacht griped. “I didn’t expect the temperature difference from the capital to be so great. We *have* gone south, but not by much.”

“The temperature is generally the same as in the capital,” I explained. “It’s just hotter than usual this year.”

When I said that, Nacht lifted his head from the window he’d been slouching against. “You’ve been before?” he asked, staring at me with wide-open eyes, and for the first time in a while, he looked his actual age.

“I went a few times a couple of years ago. I’ve been here in early summer before, and it wasn’t this hot.”

“You’re more active than your appearance would suggest, or more nimble I suppose...” Nacht mused. “You’ve probably toured the world without me realizing that you’ve even gone.”

I wasn't convinced that he was complimenting me, but I smiled anyway. More importantly, my focus shifted to what he'd said about my appearance. Was that really the impression that I gave off? Did he think that I looked like someone who'd spend all day inside?

"This heat might be the reason the tropical disease has begun to spread," I said.

"If that's the case, then the medicine we've brought with us from the capital has a good chance of working. I was worried that we might have a new disease on our hands, but I'd be delighted to find out that I was worrying over nothing." Nacht's expression relaxed slightly.

For a short while, we chatted about nothing of importance, and then the carriage arrived in Grenze.

Being a town that was located near Vint's border with their former enemy, Skelluts, Grenze was a fortress settlement enclosed by tall walls. It had previously flourished as a military base, but these days, trade with Flanmer had led to a boom in its commercial activity.

When I'd looked upon the sturdy walls during my last visit, I'd expected the town to be a gloomy place. But within the walls, I'd been surprised by how merry and feisty the townspeople had been. The men would drink ale by the barreland and brawl with each other over meaningless arguments. And then, a few minutes later, they'd break into song together, arms locked around one another's shoulders. I'd been flabbergasted and had found them impossible to understand, but one man had told me that most soldiers were simpleminded idiots.

That man was Heinz von Giaster, the lord who presided over this land. I would occasionally correspond with him, but it had been two years since I'd last met him in person.

I wonder if he's doing all right... Knowing him, probably.

I remembered his cheerful grin and felt my lips curl into a smile. I could imagine him coming out to greet us and saying, "Long time no see!" before ruffling my hair as though I were a neighborhood child.

Unfortunately, I would have to content myself with just imagining that because we were unable to meet the frontier lord right away. Instead of the muscular old man that I knew, we were welcomed to town by a young man who possessed a face that made him appear high-strung. He introduced himself as Philip von Giaster, the son of Lord Heinz.

Apparently, Lord Heinz was getting bed rest for an illness.

Prince Licht expressed his condolences, looking genuinely upset, and behind him, Nacht and I exchanged glances. Nacht looked pale, and I wouldn't have doubted that I did as well.

What sort of disease could possibly knock that indestructible old man off his feet? I shudder to think...

"I've heard that you have an outbreak of illness here. Is that what Lord Giaster has caught?" Nacht asked.

For some reason, Philip widened his eyes in astonishment. "How do you know about that?"

"We've heard merchants gossiping... Is that a problem?"

Philip smiled bitterly and shook his head. "No, I simply didn't expect the rumor to have found its way to the capital. The tropical disease isn't around anymore. My father has a chronic illness, which has worsened recently and is the cause of his current ill health. The two are unrelated."

Philip's words stunned me.

I was astounded by both the revelation that the tropical disease had been subdued and the news that Lord Heinz had a chronic illness.

"Are you certain that the outbreak is over?" Nacht asked, looking troubled.

"Yes. The rumors were overblown because of the fast spread of the disease, likely due to this year's heat wave. However, our fever cures worked, and now everyone's right as rain."

"I see," replied Nacht, nodding, although he didn't look entirely convinced.

I also found it strange... The conclusion was too underwhelming. *No, I ought to treat this like the good news that it is. That's one problem solved. Now, all*

that's left is to deal with the deforestation.

"Are you sure?" In my mind, I imagined an adorable girl asking that question. The voice belonged to my dear sister, who'd been apart from me for so many years, and it probably represented what passed for my conscience. I would hear her whenever I'd act in my own self-interest, or put off unpleasant tasks, or when making an insincere decision.

What would she do in this situation? I'd always ask myself this when her voice popped into my head, and without fail, I'd wind up reversing my decision entirely. *If she were here, she'd snoop around on her own until she'd satisfied her suspicions, regardless of whether it held any benefit for her or mattered to anyone else.*

She wouldn't turn a blind eye. Especially not when people's lives were at stake.

I heaved a long sigh.

I'm the prince of an allied country, so I should avoid doing anything careless. I shouldn't stir up trouble with the frontier lord's heir. But...it'll be fine to act as I please, just as long as I don't get caught. I have plenty of sly tricks up my sleeves.

Those thoughts swirled through my mind as I followed after Prince Licht and Princess Julia, who were being escorted away.

First of all, I wanted to see the state of the town, and if possible, I would've liked to speak with some of the townspeople. Unfortunately, we had little freedom to do very much. We were soon confined to the lord's mansion, allegedly for our safety, and people clung to us night and day. We couldn't even enter the gardens without a guard accompanying us. Though we had our own protection—knights of the Kingdom of Vint's royal guard—the lord's son insisted on sending soldiers from his personal retinue with us.

Is it just my distrusting disposition...or are we actually targets of surveillance?

I considered a somewhat risky plan: slipping out of the mansion in the dead of night. Before I could enact it though, an unexpected golden opportunity fell into my arms—the inspection of the southwestern forest had been rescheduled to

an earlier date. What's more, Philip would be accompanying our party for the tour, and would thus be out of town on that day.

This was my chance... I wasn't going to miss it.

I announced to Prince Licht and the others that I wouldn't be joining them for the inspection. Out loud, I explained that I was weary from our long journey, and I tried to give the impression that I'd rather enjoy myself than take part in boring official business.

I'd apparently earned a reputation in Grenze as a sleazy and lazy prince, so everyone believed my act without a second thought. Of course, that had been my plan from the start; whenever Philip had been around, I'd muttered things like "Ooh, that maid is so pretty" or "Meetings are sooo boring" and other plainly idiotic remarks. My strategy had paid off.

I saw the other royals off with a jolly wave of my hands and a smile on my face. Nacht shot me a suspicious look, but I pretended not to notice. He'd probably question my motives later, but he'd cheer up once I handed over the information that I was going to gather.

Nacht, be the clever prince you are and do your best to keep Philip occupied. I'll be here working hard and gathering intel as the stupid prince.

"I'm hungry," I remarked on my way back to the mansion.

The servant that Philip had assigned to me put on a slightly stiff smile and answered, "I'll have a meal prepared when we're back at the mansion." His name was Timo, and he was around thirteen or fourteen. He had soft, unkempt tawny hair and downward-slanting eyes of the same color. His most distinctive feature was the sparse speckling of freckles on his face. He was a slim boy who looked to be timid.

"There's no need to put yourself out," I said. "We'll find something quick to eat on the way back."

Timo began to panic when he heard my suggestion. "Huh? B-But..." He was probably under orders from Philip to keep me inside the mansion.

"What's that lovely smell?" I inquired. "Is there a stand grilling meat nearby?"

“Yes, there’s skewered lamb, our local specialty... But it’s not fit for a prince to eat!”

“Oh, is it the one garnished with parsley seeds? I’ve heard that they use all kinds of condiments and garnishes. Is that true?”

“It is! Every shop has its own blend, and the real fun is touring them all to find the tastiest one!” Timo’s eyes sparkled as he spoke with enthusiasm, but then he regained control of himself. “You know a lot about our local dishes, Your Highness.” He was blushing, and he scratched his cheek as if he were a little embarrassed.

“I know this merchant who told me about them. It’ll be a waste of a trip if I don’t enjoy some tasty treats,” I remarked, once again putting on the veneer of a pleasure-seeking, impulsive prince.

That seemed to convince Timo. “Ah, I see.”

The truth is, of course, that I’ve been here several times, and the one that taught me about your specialty dishes was your master, Lord Heinz.

“Pull the carriage over where there aren’t many people,” I demanded.

The knight from Vint’s royal guard complied at once and relayed my order to the driver. Timo watched me begin to climb out of the carriage with a look of dismay. It seemed that he was desperate to stop me but couldn’t find the right words to make me listen.

“What’s the harm in a little detour?” I asked casually.

“Y-You can’t!” Timo stammered. “And...people will see you. You’ll stand out...”

I glanced down at my outfit and nodded. “You have a point.”

My white blouse and boots would probably be okay, but my buttoned gilet and culottes were made from fine, olive-colored cloth. The embroidery on them wasn’t gaudy, but it was complicated and elaborate. The garments were unmistakably the work of a master tailor.

“I’ll do a bit better without the gilet, I think.”

Timo watched me in disbelief as I began to unbutton and take off the gilet. I

paid him no mind and moved on to removing my cravat before loosening my collar.

The knight handed me a dark brown cloak. "Take this, Your Highness."

What a considerate guard. Although, isn't it his job to advise me against this?

I shot the knight a suspicious look, but that didn't seem to bother him. In fact, he started removing his own armor. *It looks like he plans to tag along in plain clothes. Did Nacht give him some special instructions before we parted? It's good to know that my friend's looking out for me.*

Once we were fully prepared, Timo gave up on trying to stop us. "Don't tell anyone about this," he said with tears in his eyes.

I felt guilty for doing this to him, but he didn't have to worry about me telling anyone. To be honest, I was probably more interested in keeping this detour a secret than he was.

"I wonder where the best shop is..." I said. "Is there anywhere you'd recommend?"

"There...is," Timo replied hesitantly. "One on the road up ahead."

"Let's pay a visit then."

Timo sighed, and his shoulders slumped. "The main street has a lot of foot traffic, so stay close to me."

I smiled cheerily and nodded.

While I walked behind him, I stole subtle glances around the area. There were rows of brickwork buildings, and over their roofs, I could make out the tall walls enclosing the town. The scenery was exactly the same as it'd been on my last visit. At first glance, nothing seemed odd about the people bustling past us either. However, it did look to me like there was a greater diversity in hair and skin color than I remembered. Thriving trade had likely attracted people from foreign countries to the town.

Watching them, I recalled something: *I remember reading in a book that there's a race of dark-skinned people living in the southwestern forest.* I'd been worried about whether the harmful aftereffects of deforestation would drive

them from their homes and force them to relocate to the town, but I hadn't spotted anyone fitting that description yet.

"That's it," Timo said, pointing. The shop appeared to be quite popular, and people were queuing outside. "Please wait here while I go and purchase the food," Timo said before scurrying away. He looked over his shoulder just once and warned us, "Please do *not* wander off!" Then, he got in line.

The knight and I walked to the side of the road, out of the way, and waited patiently. I rested my back against the wall of a house, and then I heard a child's voice. When I looked up, I realized that the voice was coming from an open window on the second floor. A verbal battle was raging between a young girl begging to be let outside to play and her mother telling her to stay inside.

Isn't that precious? I thought, breaking into a smile. However, my smile faded after the mother's chastising voice grew louder. She was just stopping her child from having her own way, and yet her voice sounded...desperate. It was almost like she was begging her daughter.

"Hmmm?" I tilted my head. *Why is she so urgently trying to stop her child from coming out? I could understand her concern if it were nighttime, but it's not even noon yet. The soldiers here can be a little rough, but they wouldn't stoop to mistreating a kid. Lord Heinz can't stand people who would.*

So, what's her reason? As I thought about it, the first possibility that popped into my head was the contagious disease. Children and the elderly were particularly at risk of developing severe symptoms.

I took another glance around the area. There were plenty of people on the street, but no children or old people. There were few women too. The bulk of the crowd consisted of merchants.

I cupped my chin with a hand and sank into thought for a while... Then it hit me.

"So that's it."

There were indeed more foreigners than usual, but that wasn't all. Their presence had stood out to me even more because there were few locals to be seen. Most of Grenze's residents had light-brown hair and eyes, and their skin

was pale like ivory. Those attributes were common in Vint, but when I scanned the main street, only half of the people there fit that description. Where had the rest of the town's residents gone? Were they staying indoors like the mother and daughter on the second floor of the house behind me? Or...

"They're somewhere else..." I muttered.

Just then, Timo returned. "Sorry for the wait!"

"Hello again. I apologize for not joining you in the queue."

"Not at all! I'm no stranger to waiting in line, so it doesn't bother me. Never mind that, get them while they're hot!"

He handed me a lamb skewer. The smell of the spices and grilled meat wafted into my nostrils.

"Silly me, you don't want to eat on your feet..." said Timo. "I'll find somewhere for us to sit."

"It's fine. I'd look rather silly fretting about manners when all I'm eating is skewered meat." *When in Vint, do as the Vintians do...* I sank my teeth into the lamb without hesitation, stunning Timo.

The moment the meat entered my mouth, the particular smell of this dish made it to my nose. As I chewed, I experienced a taste unlike that of beef or pork. *A powerful taste, as always. But that's what makes it so good.*

"How is it?" Timo asked.

"It's great," I replied after I'd swallowed. "The meat is so tender."

Timo smiled limply with relief. The gamey taste of the mutton and the spices used could be divisive to certain palates, so he'd probably been worried that I wouldn't like it.

Sorry though, Timo. The truth is that I've eaten this plenty of times before.

"They use young lambs for these skewers," Timo explained. "Meat from older sheep smells stronger, and it's too much for some people, even folks that live here."

"I didn't know that," I replied nonchalantly. *I think that has its own charm too,*

I thought. *I remember seeing soldiers drinking themselves into a stupor in a tavern while eating this, and the smell is what they loved, so it does have fans.*

At that point in my thoughts, I realized something else that was curious—I hadn't seen a single familiar face here. Not in the frontier lord's mansion, and not in the town either. My only acquaintances in this town were all subordinates of Lord Heinz, and there weren't exactly many of them.

Today was my first time walking around the town, so perhaps it was natural that I hadn't bumped into anyone I knew... But wasn't it peculiar that every one of the soldiers guarding the mansion was a stranger to me? Surely they weren't all from Philip's private retinue? If they were, then where were Lord Heinz's subordinates?

"We should return to the mansion once we finish eating," Timo suggested.

"Yes, sure," I replied absentmindedly.

"Hot again today," complained Nacht. "I'm starting to miss the capital."

—Philip told us in a roundabout way that we should leave Grenze now that our business is concluded.

"The inspection and the discussions have all gone smoothly," I replied, "so we should be able to return now, shouldn't we?"

—Now that Philip has promised to impose a limit on the number of trees cut down, it will be hard to find an excuse to stick around. Delaying our departure will arouse his suspicion.

Nacht and I were having two simultaneous conversations. Out loud, our words were innocuous, but we were also exchanging written notes across the table, jotted down on pieces of paper.

Nacht's expression soured. He snatched the fountain pen from my hand and furiously scribbled another message.

"You're right," Nacht said out loud. "I suppose we should get prepared for our return journey to the capital."

—Everything's concluded too smoothly! I didn't see a single logger in the

southwestern forest, and we were only allowed into the mouth of the woods. That can hardly be called a proper inspection!

As he scrawled rapidly, the paper stretched and almost tore, which spoke volumes about Nacht's anger. I took the fountain pen from his hand and wrote —*Calm down* in large letters.

Although his grimace formed creases in his forehead that were large enough to stick a coin into (and have it stay put), he did nod gravely.

While I'd been feasting on meat in the town, Nacht and the others had visited the southwestern forest. However, they hadn't been shown to any sites where logging was taking place, and they had been forbidden from venturing in too deeply. The stated reason for barring their entry was that heavy rains from a few days prior had caused a landslide. That was also used to explain why the logging had been temporarily halted.

It was true that there had been heavy rains, and it was conceivable that felling trees had softened the ground. But...

"How about we buy some souvenirs to take back with us?" I asked.

—*What about the village deep inside the forest?*

A race of dark-skinned people had settled in the depths of the woods. Although the onset of deforestation had destabilized their livelihoods and made it difficult to reside in the forest, I doubted that they had all moved away.

Nacht scanned his eyes across my note and then pursed his lips. His expression looked pained. "Souvenirs sound like a great idea. I hear that Flanmerian fabrics are superb."

—*Apparently, they've been unable to contact that village due to the roads becoming impassable.*

Ridiculous! I thought. *Why the hell are Philip and the others sitting around entertaining us as guests at a time like this?!*

I quickly wrote a response.

—*Is there a rescue operation? Are they making progress in clearing a path to the village?*

—Not yet. Philip says that they can't get started without risking the lives of those taking part in the relief.

—That's absurd. It's been days since the heavy rain.

—They're insisting that the villages will be fine because they've always managed well without having much to do with the outside world.

I wanted to curse them for being so foolish. My lips rose in a twisted, sarcastic smile, and I penned a reply.

—They seem to have forgotten who it was that snatched the villagers' way of life out from under them.

Nacht glanced at me and then tapped on the paper with the second knuckle of his index finger. He was pointing at the spot where I'd written in large letters *—Calm down* just moments ago.

I cast my gaze down, let my eyelids fall shut, and sighed. After rubbing the side of my temple with my fingers, I looked back up. I made eye contact with Nacht and nodded; he nodded back. I started writing once more.

—The fact that they haven't commenced rescue efforts means that they might be lying about the landslide.

Nacht took the paper and responded immediately.

—If that's the case, then we need to investigate the forest.

"Flanmer's fabrics are apparently quite popular with the ladies in the capital," I continued, carrying on the thread of our vocal conversation.

Just then, someone else piped up. "Really?!"

I groaned.

The meaningless spoken conversation that we'd used to cover for our written exchange had been interrupted by a third party. Nacht scowled at the enthusiastic outburst of our unexpected interloper.

Prince Licht suddenly snatched both of my hands and swung them up and down. "Corinna and Eleanora have been giving me the cold shoulder recently. I was going to bring them back a souvenir, but I wasn't sure what to get them..."

Thanks for the great idea!”

His beaming face was right next to mine, and I returned a stiff smile. “I’m glad to have been of service, Licht.” On the inside, I thought, *The reason why Corinna and Eleanora are upset with you is obvious—you can’t take your eyes off Princess Julia.*

To tell the truth, this annoying...sorry, intolerably cheerful...no, wait, that’s not it either... Jaunty! That’s how I’d describe him. This *jaunty* prince had been in the same room as Nacht and me all along. Princess Julia was attending to her own business today, and Prince Licht wasn’t comfortable in his own company, so he’d clung to us the whole day. This left Nacht and myself in a bind, as we’d wanted to catch each other up to speed on the latest information. We’d decided to use written notes to exchange our findings, just to be safe from possible eavesdroppers, but explaining that to Prince Licht would have only confused him. I imagined that his involvement would’ve actually set us back.

As a last resort, Nacht had come up with an idea for a game. The rules were simple: hold a spoken conversation without referencing the written conversation.

Prince Licht had liked the idea and had taken part at first, but soon after the game had begun, he’d dropped out. Instead, he’d started napping on the sofa, either because he’d grown bored or because he hadn’t liked his chances of winning.

I’d been relieved to be rid of his yammering, but it seemed that I’d let my guard down. *I ought to be disappointed in myself. Imagine me, picking the wrong topic to talk about.*

“I think that you should stop seeing them,” Nacht suggested.

“Why’s that?” Prince Licht asked.

“You shouldn’t lead unmarried women astray, brother. It could affect their marital prospects, and you won’t be able to take responsibility for that.” Nacht glared at Prince Licht sharply. *“Behave as the crown prince should”* was the message that he was implicitly conveying.

But Prince Licht only tilted his head, still smiling innocently. “How is sending

them gifts leading them astray? If I give them the finest fabrics, I'm sure that they'll show me their best smiles in return. I think that beautiful women should smile, and that's all I want."

Prince Licht's grin concealed no hidden motive. Someone with a mischievous mindset could easily have said those same words, but Nacht was painfully aware of how empty his brother's head was...which explained the disgruntled look on Nacht's face.

Nacht muttered something to himself, too quiet for us to make out. Judging from the movement of his lips, I imagined that he'd said, "*You're leaving them in limbo.*"

And that was exactly what Prince Licht was doing. I wasn't sure how prestigious the families of Corinna and Eleanora were, but they wouldn't stand a chance against Princess Julia. The prospects of either of them becoming the crown prince's bride were exceedingly unlikely. However, they'd have trouble finding anyone else to marry if they continued to receive Prince Licht's favor—no other men would go near the prince's favorites. Most noble girls married in their midteens, so this most crucial time period was being wasted because of a dumb, thoughtless prince... My heart bled for them.

But I kept my thoughts to myself. Perhaps that was heartless of me, but I'd decided that it wasn't my place to interfere in matters that didn't concern me.

Prince Licht's next words, however, concerned me a great deal.

"You get what I'm saying, don't you, Johan? You want to see your beautiful older sister smile, don't you?"

"Excuse me?"

"I've heard that your sister is so beautiful, like a doll created by the finest craftsman," Prince Licht gushed. "She has golden hair and blue eyes, so what color scheme do you think would be best for a dress? Imagining her wearing one makes me so happy."

I heard a snapping noise. *What was that?* I wondered in the back of my mind.

When I raised my head, I saw that Nacht's expression was stilted and his eyes were fixed on one of my hands. I followed his gaze and saw that the fountain

pen was in two pieces. Apparently, the source of the noise had been me, snapping the pen in half.

“I’d love to send your sister a gift someday,” Prince Licht continued. “I’ll get her the finest jewels and dresses... Oh, does she like sweet stuff? I’ll have our chefs show off their best work.”

“You’ll send my sister a gift?” I asked. “You have no reason to.”

“I do! Adorning beautiful women with beautiful things is my purpose in life, my mission, my—”

I cut off his torrent of words. “Licht.”

His eyes widened, and Nacht blanched, which was rare for him.

I grinned brightly at the two of them. “You jest.”

Not even a splash of mud or massive facial burns could degrade my sister’s loveliness. Why? Because her true beauty was her pure heart, her very way of life. I couldn’t stand hearing talk of her beauty from an idiot incapable of understanding that...especially one who couldn’t look beyond skin-deep, outward appearance.

“I’m not jok— Mphmph?!”

Prince Licht had failed to notice the mood in the air and had tried to continue the conversation, but Nacht covered Licht’s mouth with his hand.

“Please, just shut up.”

At that moment, I wouldn’t have minded if Nacht had suffocated him.

“Farewell, and have a safe journey,” said Philip.

“Thank you. It’s unfortunate that we were unable to visit your father, but please relay our good wishes.” Prince Licht concluded his simple farewells and then boarded the carriage.

In the end, we had to begin our return journey without partaking in a single meeting with Lord Heinz. We’d asked to visit him and check on his health several times, but Philip had found excuses to refuse us. He’d told us that Lord

Heinz wouldn't want us to see him in his enfeebled state, and that had made it difficult to insist any further.

It truly was shrewd of him to play on our emotions, I thought with annoyance.

"I do miss the capital, but I wish I could stay a bit longer," Prince Licht mumbled softly as he gazed through the carriage window toward Grenze.

He'd wanted to ride home on a horse, but he'd relented and boarded the carriage after some gentle prodding from Nacht. He generally ignored what other people said, but he did tend to listen to Nacht. Half of the time, anyway.

"We're going to stop for a break in a town up ahead, right?" Prince Licht asked. "Can we have a look at some of the shops? I want to see if I can find a few more souvenirs to bring back."

"No," replied Nacht. "We'll be leaving as soon as we've finished our break and a meal."

"How come?"

"Because I want you to distract Philip, Licht."

"Distract Philip?" Prince Licht asked, confused. "Nacht, I don't get what you're saying."

Nacht started to explain. However, it was obvious to both Nacht and me that a thorough explanation would just muddle Prince Licht's understanding, so Nacht only mentioned the main points, and in concise terms. First, it was possible that the tropical disease hadn't gone away, and that the infected were being kept in quarantine somewhere. Second, we suspected that Philip was trying to conceal that. Third, we might have been under surveillance.

Prince Licht didn't reply for a while after Nacht had finished speaking. He just sat there wearing a troubled expression. It was a rare sight—his brows were furrowed and he was crossing his arms. "So, what you're saying is," he replied after some silence, "Philip is up to no good?"

"That's more or less what I'm saying," Nacht confirmed.

"And the sick people might be out there somewhere, so you're going to look for them?"

To Nacht's and my relief, he'd understood. His paraphrasing was rather childish, but that didn't matter. It was practically a miracle that he'd only needed one round of explanation.

"You're going yourself?" Prince Licht asked Nacht.

"I am," Nacht replied without hesitation.

Prince Licht's expression grew severe. I'd never seen him looking so serious before. He shook his head and said, "No. You can't."

My eyes widened, but in contrast, Nacht scrunched his face up bitterly. His reaction suggested to me that a part of him had been expecting Prince Licht's response.

"Why do that when you can just confront Philip directly?" Prince Licht suggested. "Or just order him to let you investigate the places that you want to. We have that authority."

"We only have suspicions at the moment," Nacht replied. "What would the common people think of us if we accused Philip of a crime without any evidence? That would be abusing our authority. The Giaster family is influential in the entirety of western Vint, so we can't provoke them without a good reason. Not until we have a definite criminal charge that's clear for everyone to see. Moreover, if we act hastily, we may bring about the worst-case scenario."

"Which is...?" asked Prince Licht.

Nacht was beating around the bush, and the meaning of his words was lost on Prince Licht. His brother was an honest and straightforward person—Nacht had probably found it too difficult to explain that Philip might conceal evidence by eliminating all of the diseased villagers.

"At any rate," Nacht continued, "we should avoid anything that would alert Philip."

"But still! There's no need for *you* to go!"

Certainly, it was preposterous for a prince to conduct an investigation himself. Under normal circumstances, we would request that an order of knights carry out the task. But in this case, we had too little time to follow the proper

procedures; there were also strict conditions that the personnel dispatched for this task would have to meet. A prompt reaction was necessary, and exceptional measures were called for since this circumstance lacked a definite criminal charge.

“Supposing that we sent a few knights from the royal guard to investigate and they found evidence of wrongdoing,” Nacht said. “That would be meaningless if Philip got rid of them. In the worst case, he might even kill to keep them quiet. In that regard, if I were the one he found, I wouldn’t be so easily silenced.”

“But you can’t guarantee you won’t be in danger, can you?!” exclaimed Prince Licht.

“Not in absolute terms, but on account of my status, I am much more likely to survive than any knight we might send.”

“What if you catch the disease?!”

“If that happens, I’ll look for medicine. After all, healing the sick is the entire point.”

“Nacht!” Prince Licht was growing frustrated that his protests were being sidestepped with ease. He was trying to find a way to stop his little brother, but Nacht was refusing to budge from his position. They’d swapped their usual roles.

All that I could do was watch the two of them, dazed. I’d known that they weren’t on bad terms with each other, but I was surprised at just how concerned Prince Licht was for Nacht.

“Then, I’ll go instead,” Prince Licht declared, his face mournful.

“No, you won’t, and you know it,” Nacht said bluntly. He looked exasperated. “You’re going to be king one day.”

But Prince Licht didn’t back down. “You’re the one that Vint needs, Nacht, not me.”

“Don’t be silly.”

“Even our father wants you to be the next king. And I’ve always dreamed of becoming the captain of the royal guard and protecting you once you’ve

become king. But you refused. You said you weren't built for it, that I was the right person for the job, and you foisted it onto me."

I'm not sure whether I should be hearing this, I thought as I broke out into a cold sweat. My eyes flicked between the teary face of Prince Licht and the sour-faced Nacht.

"You *are* the right person," stated Nacht. "The king is both the representative and the symbol of the state. That calls for someone like you, who's practically the embodiment of light, rather than a dark and dreary person like me."

"They call me the Prince of Light because I look okay, but that doesn't give me any advantages in governance. Without you supporting me, I'd be the last king of Vint."

So this prince has the capacity for objective introspection after all. He might be a bit smarter than I gave him credit for.

On this occasion, Nacht was the one with the illogical viewpoint—handsomeness and a cheery demeanor weren't necessary to become king, and Nacht had all of the actual prerequisites. By my estimation, Nacht simply didn't want the job. He detested being the center of attention, and so he'd left his brother to take up that odious work instead.

I'd always watched Nacht being pulled from pillar to post by his brother's uninhibited lifestyle with a degree of sympathy for his plight, but at this moment, I decided that I might have to reconsider whom I should be feeling sorry for; when Nacht acted selfish, he was far more wicked than his brother.

I shot Nacht an accusatory glare.

"What's with that look?" he asked.

"Nothing," I said. "I simply wasn't aware that anything like that was going on behind the scenes, and I've found myself feeling a little sorry for Licht."

"Wh-What else could I have done?! The state could be thrown into disarray if we jump past the healthy crown prince to allow the second prince to accede to the throne. Worst comes to worst, the kingdom could be divided into two factions. We have to avoid such a danger, and so—"

“Oh, so you were just *dying* to become king, were you?” I interrupted without waiting for Nacht to finish.

He lost his tongue. I must have hit the nail on the head.

“Nacht...” Prince Licht stared forlornly at his brother. His eyes looked like those of an abandoned puppy, and the sight appeared to leave Nacht guilt-stricken.

Nacht heaved a long sigh and then gripped Prince Licht’s hands with both of his own. Then, he patted Prince Licht’s hands comfortingly. “I’ll come back alive. I promise,” Nacht said, looking Prince Licht straight in the eyes.

After a long silence, Prince Licht gave a small nod of his head.

Once that had been decided, we stopped for a break in town. Nacht and I swapped places with two serving boys. Prince Licht hung around for a while, moping and uneager to part with Nacht, but eventually, Princess Julia convinced him to return to the carriage.

Nacht and I made sure that the carriage carrying Prince Licht and his party departed without incident, and then we looked at each other.

“Right then, what should we do now?” Nacht asked.

“We already have horses and food... All we need is a guard, I suppose.”

The two of us walked through the town’s streets, guiding the horses by their reins.

We’d arranged for our mounts, luggage, and body doubles to be prepared before leaving Grenze, but our last-minute preparations hadn’t included securing a guard. It would’ve aroused suspicion to leave even a single member of the royal guard behind in the town. At the same time though, it was unclear how much we could trust the locals.

“Hmm, we do need one,” Nacht said. “Speaking for myself at least, I am exceptionally weak. An assailant would only need to strike me once to kill me. But I doubt that finding a guard will be easy.”

“If we go to the tavern, there ought to be a mercenary or two...” I said, but my words trailed off when my eyes found the tavern’s rusted sign. “But finding

someone that meets our specifications might be challenging.”

Our guard would need to have tight lips and be someone that we could trust to keep a secret. Someone not under the influence of the Giaster family, so preferably an outsider. Someone who’d follow our orders without prying into our motives. Someone willing to brave the risk of catching the disease and help us anyway. Was it even possible to find someone like that in a single day?

“As if we’d be so lucky...” I whined.

At the same time, a voice suddenly spoke to me. “It’s not like you to be so pessimistic.”

I jumped away from the newcomer instinctively. The sudden tug of the reins made the horse neigh in surprise.

Behind me was a tall...man, I imagined, from the sound of the voice. The figure was wearing a hood that obscured his face.

I rubbed the startled horse’s belly to calm it down.

For a moment, I wondered whether Philip had sent him, but if that was the case, then his behavior didn’t make sense. He’d recognized me as Johan von Velfalt when he’d spoken to me, so he must have followed us. But why? I was perplexed.

Before my eyes, the man pinched his hood with his fingers and lifted it up slightly, giving me a glimpse of the face beneath it.

My suspicion lasted only for a moment. As soon as I realized who this man was, my eyes grew wide.

The Reincarnated Princess in Indecision

“I-I’m spilling iiit!”

I was currently waddling and staggering down a path carrying a bucket of water in each hand...and probably looking like a burdened crab. Each time I tried to pull up harder with my right hand, the bucket in my left hand would sag, but when I focused on the left one, the same would happen in reverse. As I slowly stumbled along like a drunk and blind office worker, I left a polka-dot trail of puddles in my wake. I’d filled the buckets to the brim with water, but now there was only about sixty percent left in each.

How am I doing this badly?!

Lily, who was walking ahead of me, peered back over her shoulder with a look of frustration. She had a carrying pole slung over her shoulders, and buckets full of water hung from each end of the pole. However, she moved like the heavy buckets weighed nothing at all. “This is why I told you not to carry two,” she chastised, sighing and walking back over to me. Even carrying her burden, she was still light on her feet.

How can she be so strong when she’s so tiny and thin? I wondered, puzzled. *I suppose she’s just had a lot more experience than me.* By the way, I was carrying the buckets with my hands... I couldn’t figure out the pole.

“Come on, put the buckets down,” said Lily. “We’ll take a quick break.” Neither her facial expression nor her voice betrayed any emotion, but I knew that she was being considerate of me. Over the past few days we’d spent together, I’d found out that Lily was an incredibly kind person.

I took her up on her thoughtful offer and lowered the buckets to the ground. My hands were numb, so I clenched them into fists and then slowly released them. A deep, red line ran across the middle of each of my palms. “Ouch...”

“This is what happens when a princess tries to draw water,” Lily said.

“But it’s the thing that I’m the least bad at...”

It had been decided that I would be treated as a guest of the Khuer. Of course, that was only temporary, as they couldn't keep me stowed away here forever. The arrangement was extremely generous; for the most part, I didn't have to do anything as long as I stayed put in my room. If I fancied a walk around the village, I could take one, as long as there was someone to watch me. However, that seemed *too* generous for my liking—it left me feeling guilty.

When I'd asked the chief if I could help out around the village, he'd immediately agreed, but Lily and many of the other villagers weren't so pleased about that decision. Apparently, they'd protested that having an outsider assist was unacceptable. Having me traipse around the village was bad enough already, they'd said. But they were honestly nice people, so eventually, they'd relented.

It was more than that, actually. Although they did appear grumpy around me, they'd give me advice and even lend me a hand. I was sure that the villagers were all virtuous people at heart.

"You're wrong," Lily told me. "Physical labor is what you're worst at."

"Lily's right," a voice called out from behind me. "You should sit tight inside your room, Princess." The next moment, I saw a pair of hands grab my buckets of water by their handles, and a well-built man of over forty lifted them with ease and walked off.

"E-Excuse me! I'll carry them!" I protested, running after the man as he walked briskly along.

He bluntly refused. "We'll be here all day if we leave it up to you."

"Maybe, but..."

"Outta the way, dummy." A small figure passed by me, and as he did, he flipped my skirt up high.

"Aaaah?!"

The weird cry I let out sounded like a trampled frog. I hurriedly pushed the hem of my skirt down. I glared at the boy, who had exactly the bratty face I'd imagined he would. He grinned back at me in amusement.

“What do you think you’re doing?!” I shouted, my face scarlet.

But the boy just snorted. “Your clothes flap everywhere and get in the way, so I had to clear a path for myself, that’s all.”

This little punk!

“Where are your manners, Rolf?” Lily chastised.

However, the brat—aka Rolf—paid little attention to her. “Whatever.”



Perhaps I should've counted my blessings. At least Rolf would interact with me; most of the villagers wouldn't even come near. But no, I couldn't feel grateful. I was, in fact, out of my comfort zone with him. I'd never been around a boy like this before.

Most of the boys I'd met in my life were gentlemen. George and Michael had been raised as nobles, so they'd obviously never do anything like this to me...but neither would Lutz or Teo, and they'd been raised in the city. And it should go without saying that the same applied to Sir Leonhart and Lord Julius. In a way, Rolf was the most *boyish* of the boys I'd met so far.

He had short, stiff ash-gray hair, honey-colored almond eyes, and brown skin—all the distinctive colors of the Khuer tribe. His facial structure was a touch too rough to call handsome. He was small, but looking at his arms and neck, I could see a good volume of muscle. His appearance conjured images of a wolf or stray dog in my mind, and he looked somewhat similar to Wolf.

Rolf raised an eyebrow and looked at me with his piercing eyes. "What are you staring at, ugly?"

"Nothing at all," I hissed through gritted teeth.

Scratch that—Rolf wasn't like Wolf at all. Wolf could be stern from time to time, but he would never insult a woman like that.

Sorry, Wolf, for comparing you to this brat.

"Let's go, Lady Mary," Lily soon prompted me.

"All right."

I walked behind her. Rolf followed as well, but I ignored him.

On our way to drop the water off, we passed near a tall, thin stone. Lily came to a stop in front of the stone, set down her carrying pole, and got onto her knees. She placed her hands together in front of her chest in prayer and cast her eyes down.

Rolf did the same without needing prompting.

Gazing at the scene, I simply stood there, feeling like it would be wrong to copy them without understanding what they were doing.

I previously described it as a tall, thin stone, but it had apparently once been a statue. Its original shape had been worn down by exposure to the wind and rain, but it still vaguely resembled a human form.

On my second day here, when Lily had first shown me around the village, she'd told me that this was the statue of their goddess. This deity was the founder of the Khuer tribe and had apparently harbored miraculous powers, which a multitude of legends could attest to. Stories told of her ability to bring forth rain at will, and flowers would bloom all around when she sang. She could turn seeds into fully grown plants in an instant, and a single touch from her could cure wounds and diseases. The Khuer worshiped her as their goddess.

When Lily finished praying, she stood back up. "Thank you for waiting."

She'd never forced me to join in the prayers. To the Khuer, religion was a personal matter and not something to be forced onto others.

I used to be Japanese, so I've never had much to do with religion, but I like the way this one does things, I thought absentmindedly.

"Are you making dinner again tonight?" Rolf asked.

"I am," I confirmed. I might've been hopeless with physical tasks, but I could at least be a little help in the kitchen.

I thought back, remembering the first time I asked permission to cook meals... They turned me down. No surprises there. The Khuer were resistant to the idea of eating food cooked by a stranger, and they wholly rejected the "ridiculous" notion that a princess would know how to cook. But through persistent pleas, I finally managed to get them to back down and reach a compromise: I would be allowed to make one meal, but no more after that. They must've thought that I'd lose interest after a taste of failure.

As proof of that, Lily never left my side when I entered the kitchen, and she even lectured me on how to use the knives. When we started chopping up the ingredients, it seemed to me that Lily was more nervous than I was. She rarely showed any changes in her facial expression, but on that day, she looked terrified.

There was also a concerned crowd of villagers watching over us from the

entrance.

I overheard one person say, “Bring the medicine that stops bleeding in case she cuts her fingers.” Another asked, “Wouldn’t it be better for her to rip the vegetables apart with her hands, rather than slicing them with a knife?”

I knew that they had only the best of intentions, but the onlookers’ comments were breaking my concentration and making things harder.

Who do they think I am? A child contestant on the TV show Old Enough! who’s handling chores on my own for the first time? And I know I could rip the leafy vegetables apart with my bare hands, but what do they expect me to do with the root vegetables?!

However, once I started to use the kitchen knife, they fell silent, and half of my round-eyed observers returned to their own work. The other half became rapt spectators, watching each stage of my cooking with great interest. I wondered whether there was any crossover between preparing meals and making medicines, or if perhaps people involved in the medical profession just had an insatiable appetite for learning new things.

By the time I was halfway done, even Lily was practically taking notes. She would ask me the occasional question but not so often that it interfered with my work. I felt like we grew a little closer while discussing secret ingredients, chopping methods, and various other details. *Her expression looks slightly more relaxed as well*, I thought. Although, perhaps I was just projecting what I wanted to see.

Ever since that day, I’d been allowed to handle making dinner from time to time.

“What will you cook today?” Lily asked.

“Someone shared their spices with me, so I’m planning to make something a little unusual.”

The villagers grew not only vegetables and medicinal herbs, but also spices, probably because most of them could be used in medicines. There was a surprising variety in the types of spices here, and they even had ones that I hadn’t been able to procure through Lord Julius’s connections. I’d known that

cumin and coriander were commonplace in Vint, but I'd never dreamed of finding chili peppers and turmeric in a land so far from home.

Now I can make the dish I've always wanted to make. Yep...that!

"How's your tolerance for spicy foods, Lily?" I asked.

"Good," she replied. "I actually quite enjoy them."

"Me too," added Rolf.

"Nobody asked you," I said.

While we were walking along and engaging in a relaxed conversation, I heard the flapping of wings. A black-feathered bird flew over my head and fluttered around in front of me.

The vision of a man smiling sarcastically entered my mind. I imagined him saying, *"Aren't you forgetting why you came here?"*

I reached out and picked up one of its feathers from the ground. "I haven't forgotten," I mumbled quietly, casting my head down.

"Did you say something?" asked Lily, gazing into my eyes.

"Nothing," I said with a forced grin.

"Is this enough?" Lily asked, tilting the pot toward me so that I could view its contents.

I looked inside. The onions were golden and glowing. *Looks scrumptious!*

"Yes, that's great," I said. "Thank you."

"What should I do next?"

"Add these and then fry everything some more." I handed Lily some crushed garlic and chopped-up ginger. I would've preferred to grate the ginger, but I didn't have a grater.

I left the frying to Lily and pondered how much of each spice to use. There were four kinds that I planned to add: chili peppers, turmeric, cumin, and coriander. I'd taken sun-dried samples of each one and crushed them into a

powder.

“I think I’ll go for a lot of cumin and coriander, and just a pinch of red chili powder.”

Rolf watched my hands and scrunched his face up with disgust. “Do you really call this...*stuff*...food?” Apparently, he was convinced that I was mixing up a medicine, rather than making a meal.

“Each person has their own tastes, so you might not like it,” I explained, “but I can guarantee that it’s at least edible.”

“Yeah, right.” Despite his critical comments, Rolf was also kneading a bread mixture for me.

I don’t like his attitude, but he’s helping out, so he can’t be all that bad.

He was precise and careful with his hands, and when I looked at his face from the side as he worked, I could see how strongly he was concentrating. Also, he was surprisingly earnest, which was a trait he had in common with Lily.

They actually look quite similar too, in the shape of their ears and nose, I thought, looking at each of them for a comparison. Perhaps they’re related...maybe cousins.

“That should be enough,” I said. “Now we leave the dough to rest.” I took the dish of bread dough from Rolf.

I didn’t have baking powder, so I was making a simple kind of unleavened bread by mixing together wheat flour, salt, and water, then adding a little bit of oil. It was more like chapati than naan.

“Thank you for your help,” I told Rolf.

He snorted. “Don’t get used to it. I was just in a generous mood.”

So he said, but this wasn’t the first time that he’d helped me in the kitchen. Rolf was not just a brat but a *tsundere* too.

“You should learn how to do housework now,” I advised. “When you get married, your future wife will be so pleased to have you help out.”

“There’s no chance of me getting married anyway,” Rolf said casually while

wiping his dirty hands with a damp cloth.

My eyes widened and I blinked several times. Looking at him, I didn't get the impression that he was joking. "You *can* be a little insensitive," I said, "but I don't think you should be so down on yourself."

"That's not what I'm saying." Rolf sighed and then shot me a glare. "And thanks for letting me know what you think of me."

Oops, I might've put my foot in my mouth.

"There's just nobody around for me to marry," he explained. "Practically all the women in the right age range for me are already engaged."

"What?" I was stunned.

"Lady Mary, is it time to put the tomatoes in yet?" Lily asked. She was acting naturally, which made me think that I was the weird one for getting flustered.

"Yes, please do."

Gathering my thoughts, I mentally reviewed the information that I had available.

I stared at Lily. After getting my permission, she'd begun to add the crushed tomatoes to the pan. If what Rolf said was true, did that mean she was already engaged to be married?

As though he'd read my thoughts, Rolf said, "Lily's not like me. She's Wolf's fiancée."

"She is?!" In my shock, I'd accidentally shouted.

What happened to "in the right age range"? How big is the age gap between Wolf and Lily? I'm pretty sure that Wolf is in his late twenties and Lily is twelve or thirteen. That's a whole fifteen years— Wait, no, that's fine. Just right, actually. Couldn't ask for better!

"It's just a ten-year difference. That's an acceptable age gap," said Rolf. "Lily still has a long way to go before anyone can think of her as a woman, but we can't have our future chief remain a bachelor forever, so it is what it is."

"Shut up, Rolf," said Lily.

“Yeah, yeah. Sooo sorry.”

I wanted to slam the brakes on the conversation as it raced away from me. My brain couldn't keep up. I had plenty of questions, but I decided to start with the one that was playing on my mind the most. “What do you mean when you say ‘a ten-year difference’?”

Lily tilted her head, puzzled by my question. “Wolf is twenty-seven, so I suppose it would be more accurate to say an eleven-year difference, since I only just turned sixteen.”

Sixteen?! Lily is sixteen?! She was so much shorter and slimmer and cuter than I was, so finding out that she was older than me was freaky. Fortunately, I managed to avoid saying those thoughts out loud.

Physical growth was a touchy subject... The same went for me—I'd flip my lid if somebody asked me, “Are you *ever* going to look like a woman?” or said, “Still nothing to boast of in the chest area.”

Maybe the members of the Khuer tribe count people's ages differently... But twenty-seven does sound about right for Wolf.

My mind was a mess. Partly because of Lily's age, but also because I found it strange that Rolf had said there were no girls in his age range. If ten years was an acceptable age difference for marriage, did that mean that there were no other girls, even baby girls, in this village besides Lily? It was true that I hadn't spotted many children around the village, but I'd assumed that they were just staying inside because they were wary of me. I'd thought that they must come outside when I wasn't around, and I'd even felt guilty for disrupting their habits.

Shows what I know.

Just then, something that Wolf had said popped into my mind. “*I don't want to wait for our tribe to go extinct.*”

I felt a chill run down my spine. *Are Khuer mothers unable to give birth? Or maybe the children don't make it past infancy? Why not?*

The local environment was likely harder to live in than flatlands. But Flanmer was a warm country, so it didn't snow here. It wasn't too hot either; if anything, this landscape could be refreshingly cool. There was a good supply of water as

well.

Were there any outside threats? I'd only been here for a short while, but I hadn't seen any large wild animals. I had noticed traps set up by the villagers, but their purpose was to prevent animals from trampling on the crops rather than to protect the people. And while I couldn't absolutely guarantee that no bandits ever found their way to the Khuer, I thought that the chances were low. Traversing through the forest and trying to reach this village without a guide was a fool's errand. Besides, the strange looks that the villagers gave me suggested that outsiders coming here was a very rare occurrence.

"Hm?" Something niggled at my mind, and I cocked my head.

If outsiders are rare here, then most of the village's marriages must be between two members of the Khuer. Thinking back to when the villagers were under the misunderstanding that Wolf wanted to marry me...I remember someone mentioning something about mixing foreign blood into the tribe. The color of the Khuer's eyes, hair, and skin are mostly the same as well, except for minor differences in shade.

Hang on a second... I don't know how big the tribe is, but I'm sure it's not in the thousands. Adding those two factors together—small population and internal marriages—wouldn't the gene pool shrink further and further? If so, then most of the Khuer would be related.

The term "consanguineous marriage" entered my mind. Japanese law forbade marriage between people within three degrees of kinship of each other, and most countries back on Earth banned cousin marriage. It was partly due to ethical concerns, but mostly because of the genetic risk.

I only had a smattering of knowledge about this subject, but I thought I remembered that inbreeding increased the chance of recessive alleles activating. That would be fine if the allele was beneficial, but it could also result in the manifestation of congenital diseases or defects.

I'd fallen completely silent and my head had sunk. A bead of sweat dripped down my cheek. If my hypothesis was correct, then I could understand why Wolf had taken desperate measures. But even so, was it really all right for a little girl like me to intervene in this problem?

It's too serious for me to handle, I thought, and I was ashamed of myself.

I tried repeatedly to find a flaw in the thought process that had led me to the possibility of the Khuer's shrinking gene pool, but to no avail.

At least I'd fulfilled my heart's desire by making curry, but to be honest, I hardly even tasted it. I think that Rolf had complained about the taste and moaned that it didn't look like food, but I'd ignored everything he'd said.

That night, thoughts swirled around my head endlessly.

Naturally, I felt sleep-deprived the next day. I started watering the medicinal herbs, but within five minutes Lily told me to call it quits. Instead, I sat under the shade of a tree while everyone else toiled away with sweat on their brow, and it made me feel immensely guilty. I felt antsy and wanted to get up, but each time I tried to move, Lily pinned me in place with a disapproving glare.

Sorry for making you do this for me. Really.

Excluding Lily, eight people were working in the medicinal herb field. Most of them would steal a surreptitious glance at me every now and then. They weren't glaring though—they actually looked concerned. But each time I met their eyes, they'd frown and look away.

Great, more tsunderes. Is that just the default personality for this tribe? The people here are so nice it's worrying.

Quite a few of them would keep their distance from me, the outsider, but they never mistreated me. In fact, I'd been treated remarkably well. For a tribe that had a history of being attacked by bandits, surprisingly many of them were purehearted and kind.

I was sitting cross-legged with my chin in my hands. The cool breeze felt refreshing against my cheek. I narrowed my eyes and enjoyed the pleasant sensation while I watched the Khuer tending to the herbs.

If the hypothesis I came up with yesterday is correct, will I actually be able to do anything for them? I wondered. Can I help them connect to the outside world? Or can I lead them away from these mountains?

Neither plan seemed realistic. There would only be meaning if they took action themselves. The villagers wouldn't just think that I was meddling in their affairs... No, they'd interpret my proposal as an attack on their way of life. Wolf was their future chief and even his attempts at persuasion had failed to sway them, so what hope did I have? This task wasn't just difficult, it was impossible.

My thoughts were stuck in the same place, and I hadn't made any progress at all from the day before. In fact, things were worse than that. From the moment I'd arrived in Flanmer, I hadn't been in control. I'd just been tottering along without the guts to make any firm decision one way or the other.

I'm so pathetic...

Leaning against the tree's trunk, I gazed up at the sky. The sun sparkled through the leaves, searing afterimages into my retinas.

Just then, I realized something. "Come to think of it..." *I haven't even found the tree that's used to make the medicine I'm looking for.*

The tree trunk I was leaning against was thick, and the leaves were shaped differently from the illustrations I'd seen, so I didn't think this was the right one.

Maybe I'll find it farther back in the village? I want to go look for it. But, even supposing I find it, I'd be just as bad as a robber if I peel off the bark to take without permission. Plus, the medicine probably has more components than just the bark anyway. And most of all, I'm not ecstatic about the idea of running away and turning a blind eye to the Khuer's problem.

Plonk.

"Ouch!"

While I was pondering, something fell onto my head. The pain snapped me back to the real world, and I saw a small nut on my lap.

Strange... I've got a weird sense of déjà vu. I could swear this has happened before.

I craned my neck to look up and saw a black bird tilting its head atop a branch. The bird had cute little round eyes, which were entirely innocent, but even so, I could see the face of a mean-spirited man overlaid above it.

“Let me know whenever you want to give up and make a run for it.” Crow had written that in the letter I’d received on my first day in the village. I could remember angrily scrunching up the message.

The memory brought with it a resurgence of the emotions I’d experienced at the time. *Why does he always have to be so inflammatory?* I shook my head to clear those feelings away.

Taking a deep, quiet breath, I tried to calm myself down. Then, with my head facing forward, I glanced up at the bird once more with just my eyes.

How do I do this? How can I read the letter without being noticed by the people working in the field? If I lift my arm, the bird will probably fly down and perch itself there...but that would stand out too much, so that plan’s out. Could I shuffle around to the rear side of the tree? Nope, Lily will shout at me for getting up again.

While I was racking my underperforming brain for a solution, the bird approached me instead. It practically slid up next to me—there was no noise, not even the ruffling of feathers.

I changed the position of my legs and was able to hide my motions beneath the shadows they cast. Eventually, I managed to remove the letter. I slipped the message inside my shoe and then looked back over to Lily and the others. Thankfully, they hadn’t noticed anything. I let out a gentle sigh of relief.

I waited patiently for the field work to be finished, but the message preyed on my mind. Every other letter had come at night, but Crow had sent this one in the middle of the day. Maybe that meant there was an emergency. I just couldn’t stop thinking about it.

As soon as there was nobody around to watch me, I opened the letter. The message inside was incredibly succinct. But my quaint life in this village had been a dream, and the brevity of the letter was just the thing to wake me up.

There was someone that I needed to speak to.

On that same night, there was a knock at my door. It was like the person outside knew what I wanted.

“Hel...lo?” I asked.

Standing outside was someone I hadn’t expected.

I looked at him with wide-open eyes, and he smiled and raised his hand a little in greeting.

“Hey, it’s been a while,” he said. “How’ve you been?”

“Wolf!”

“Never mind me! I’m more interested in how you’ve been,” I almost said reflexively. Luckily, I caught myself in time. He’d been thrown into a cell in his homeland, and that couldn’t be a pleasant experience for anyone.

However, despite the general rigidity of my facial muscles, I was poor at making poker faces, so he saw right through to my internal dialogue. He turned his easygoing grin into a wry smile and poked me gently on my cheek.

“Don’t get all mushy on me.”

I clutched at the cheek he’d poked, and after a pause, I just said, “Okay.”

“All right.” He opened the door wide. “Somebody wants to see you. Would you come with me?”

“Sure,” I answered. This time, I didn’t hesitate. He didn’t say who wanted to see me, but I had an idea. “The chief has called for me, I presume?”

In place of an answer, Wolf narrowed his eyes to slits.

The Reincarnated Princess's Aspiration

We walked into the large house and proceeded to the doorway that was farthest away from the entrance. A second before Wolf could reach for the handle, the door swung open from inside. Across the threshold stood exactly the man I'd expected to find—the chief.

"Thank you for coming," he said, greeting me politely and inviting us in.

I stepped into the room, feeling a little nervous. As soon as I set foot inside, I noticed a smell particular to medicinal herbs.

The room itself was packed with objects. There were three separate shelves with small pigeonhole compartments, and these shelves took up the entirety of one wall. The first shelf housed vials, another stored scrolls of paper that had been rolled up and fastened with string, and the last was composed of drawers, so I couldn't see those contents.

On another wall, dried plants that I didn't recognize hung upside down. Beneath those was a desk heaped with old books—these books were piled up on either side of what looked to be a druggist's mortar, which was positioned in the center of the desk.

"I apologize for the mess. Please, sit." The chief pulled over a chair from a corner of the room and brushed some dust off the seat with the back of his hand.

When he offered me the chair, I found myself glancing up at Wolf.

Wolf gently pushed me forward, gesturing that I should accept the chief's offer, and once I'd sat down, he stood behind me and a little off to one side. "You should've cleaned up a bit more, dad. You can't invite a cute girl into this mess."

"It may not look like it," the chief said, "but I did tidy up a little."

"Clearly, you didn't try very hard."

They were both frowning at each other with no hint of affection, but the mood of the conversation was relaxed. Their voices weren't as harsh as the words that carried them either, and the general atmosphere was calm. The only time I'd seen them together had been my first day in the village, so I'd imagined them having a more impersonal relationship. However, if I ignored their positions as chief and heir, it seemed like they had a perfectly normal father-son rapport.

My nerves had been buzzing since I'd walked in, but now I felt the tension in my shoulders ease up.

I let my breath out in a small puff, and then the chief looked me in the eyes. At that, I jolted upright from my slouch. I saw a slight narrowing in his honey-colored eyes, which were surrounded by deep wrinkles, and his frown returned before I could realize that he'd been smiling at me.

"Have you gotten used to life in the village yet?" he asked, tilting a pitcher to pour water into a cup.

"I have," I replied. "I am rather clumsy, and I do get a lot of things wrong because of that, but Lily's always around to help, so I'm managing."

"She's great, isn't she?"

"Definitely." I nodded vehemently while taking the cup of water from the chief. *Lily's a wonderful girl. It can be hard to tell what she's thinking, but she's kind, earnest, and considerate. She really is amazing.*

"She's fond of you as well, so I hope you remain friends."

I almost nodded and said that we would, but I hesitated. It wasn't because I didn't want to be friends with her, but because I realized that it would be irresponsible of me to agree with him. My head began to sink.

Wolf put his hand on my shoulder. "That was mean of you, dad," he said in a low tone of voice. "Stop testing her."

I looked up and saw that Wolf was glaring pointedly at the chief.

In contrast, the chief looked completely calm. Lifting a cup from the tray, he filled it with water, then slowly raised it to his lips and drank. He didn't say a

word until he'd finished.

"You're one to talk."

"What's that supposed to mean?" asked Wolf.

"I find it hard to believe that someone as twisted as you could trust anyone at the drop of a hat. I'm sure that you've run plenty of your little tests on her to see if she's credible and fit to be our master. Am I wrong?"

He'd phrased his barrage of words as a question, but it was more like an assertion.

Wolf chewed on his lips, seeming annoyed.

The chief took one look at him and then sighed. "However, that doesn't excuse my impolite behavior." The chief placed his cup down and then bowed his head to me. "My apologies."

"No, it's all right," I replied, shaking my head. I then clasped my hands together tightly above my lap. "I've been just as impolite... Worse, in fact. I'm about to do something far more discourteous to you."

"Worse?" Wolf repeated, his voice tinged with confusion.

The chief said nothing—he just stared straight at me.

"I can't become the Khuer tribe's master," I said.

I heard a sharp intake of breath from beside me, but I kept my eyes on the chief and continued speaking. "I know how outrageous this is, and I couldn't possibly ask you to forgive me...but I can't stay here any longer. I've set foot on your land without permission and acted however I pleased, only to leave without giving anything in return."

After a long silence, the chief said, "May I ask why?"

I'd anticipated that he would fly into a rage, but he defied my expectations. He didn't even sound angry. Of the two of us, I was the one at risk of losing nerve.

"Are you asking why I can't become the Khuer's master, or why I can't stay here?"

“Both,” answered the chief, “but let’s start with the first. Our tribe is home to a rather skilled collection of people, if I do say so myself. More than a few royals and nobles would gladly empty their coffers to employ us. Are you saying that we aren’t worth that to you?” He had a testing look in his eyes.

“No, I’m not,” I replied without breaking eye contact. “I believe that you have a value that can’t be bought with even the tallest piles of gold. It’s not that I don’t *want* to become the Khuer’s master... I’m saying that I *can’t*.”

The chief’s eyes widened in surprise when he heard that. He’d maintained a perfectly calm expression so far, but now there was a slight crack in that composure.

“Neither gold nor jewels could make your tribe mine,” I said. “What’s needed is a long period of time to build a relationship of trust, sincerity, and understanding. However, I can’t offer you another day of my time.”

After a pause, the chief asked, “Is that related to your reason for having to leave?”

I nodded. “Yes. An epidemic has been detected in the southwest of the Kingdom of Vint. It must be stopped before it engulfs the entirety of Vint.”

An epidemic. That had been the contents of Crow’s report, the one that’d pulled my mind away from the peaceful life here. This was one of the flags that I’d been afraid of...and it had happened.

“An epidemic...?” said the chief and Wolf in unison. The chief’s voice sounded suspicious, and Wolf’s was confused.

Thinking about it, I never explained anything about my purpose to Wolf. I guess I can’t complain about him being the secretive one anymore. Sorry, Wolf.

Although I was apologizing to Wolf in my mind, I kept my eyes fixed on the chief. Apologies and regrets could wait. “I know that this is a brazen thing to ask, but please sell me your medicine,” I implored, and I bowed my head deeply.

The silence that followed lasted for a while and was broken eventually by the chief. “I have a number of questions, but first, please raise your head.”

I did as he requested, and my eyes met his. His expression was serious, and his amber eyes were piercing with no trace of the calm that had been there before. This must've been his countenance when he was acting as a doctor.

"Our medicine exists to heal the sick. If what you say is true, then I have no reason to refuse."

"I don't have any proof," I admitted with a forlorn look on my face.

It was true—I had no material evidence to demonstrate the validity of my claim.

"I'm not asking you to provide tangible proof. I know that's not feasible. But if you could at least tell us what you understand of the disease at the moment, we'll provide our own assessment and come to a decision ourselves."

I hadn't been planning to withhold the information anyway, so I informed Wolf and the chief about the contents of Crow's report.

The disease had been detected in a border town called Grenze in the southwest of Vint. Initial symptoms were similar to the common cold: a high fever, a sense of fatigue, and migraines. The fever would fade for a time but return after a few days. Apparently, the administration of fever cures had little to no effect.

The symptoms were identical to the disease that had been contracted by the sailors that Lord Julius told me about. In other words, there was a good chance that the medicine I was after would work against it.

"I know of a disease that fits that description," said the chief. "It will be impossible to say for sure without examining the patients directly, but I may be able to assist."

The chief's measured words filled me with hope. "So you'll—" "*Sell me the medicine?*" I tried to finish, but the chief stuck his hand out and cut me off.

"However, I'd like to ascertain something first. Why did you come to this country? It doesn't seem like you've snuck here for some secret sightseeing."

"Huh?" The question caught me completely off guard and I wasn't sure what to do. I found myself glancing toward Wolf for help, but he was watching me

with a troubled expression.

“Mary,” he said, “you told me before that you came here to look for fever medicine. Do you remember?”

“I did.”

After I replied, I realized why Wolf looked troubled. My request had been too well-timed and convenient; after all, just as a specific disease had begun to spread, I’d happened to find doctors who were capable of creating medicine to cure it. It made sense that they’d suspect me of concocting a lie just to get my hands on the medicine.

Even though I’d noticed this flaw, I couldn’t come up with any excuse. I bit my lip and hung my head, wishing that I was a better communicator.

“Your Highness,” the chief called out. “You appear to be misunderstanding me. I don’t think that you’re lying.”

“Yeah, you wouldn’t come up with such a malicious deception,” Wolf said in agreement. He gave me a light pat on my back. I had a feeling he was indicating that I should sit up straight. “Besides, you wouldn’t be able to conjure up those symptoms out of thin air. The location of the epidemic also adds credibility to your claim.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“The forest to the southwest of Grenze is undergoing some rather rapid deforestation at the moment, right? Illness thrives in environments like that. There are plenty of diseases lurking in the depths of tropical forests that are unknown to healers.”

Listening to Wolf’s explanation jogged some memories from my past life. I had no expertise in the subject, but I could recall catching reports on TV about the relation between deforestation and epidemics... Something about how the increase in contact between people and animals whose habitats had been destroyed led to previously unknown diseases spreading. Also, the disruption in the ecosystem tended to enlarge the populations of small animals and insects that served as vectors of diseases.

“So your story rings true in that regard as well,” Wolf continued. “It

just...seems too convenient. It's like you know the future."

Well, I didn't actually *know* the future; I'd just used the information from *Hidden World* to make a prediction *about* the future. However, there were now large discrepancies between the world I currently lived in and the world from the game. As things stood, my predictions were based on only one of the possible routes from *Hidden World*, and that potential future wasn't necessarily going to play out as it did in the game. Regardless, my abilities seemed overpowered anyway.

Without saying anything, I returned Wolf's direct stare. I couldn't let them know how nervous I was.

This time, it was the chief that asked a question. "Your Highness, do you have any mysterious powers?"

"No, it was merely a coincidence. I'm an ordinary person with no remarkable traits other than the fact that I'm a princess."

"Too much humility can sound condescending," the chief remarked. "My son tells me that you're the person that created the Dew of the Sea, and that you treated the sick on the ship with aplomb."

Every single thing he's bringing up is thanks to the knowledge I brought with me from my old world. There's nothing special about me as I am now. I'm really just like any ordinary girl. But there's no way I can tell him I have knowledge from a previous life. Not that I expect he'd believe me anyway.

"You truly are fit to be called... 'goddess.'"

"Huh...?"

I wasn't sure why the chief had left an emphatic pause before the word "goddess." But I wanted to know, and at the same time, I felt that something was wrong. My stay in the village had been brief, but I'd been here long enough to realize how important the notion of a goddess was to the Khuer. I knew that the chief couldn't be conflating me with *their* goddess, but it was strange that he'd use that specific word to describe a little girl from the outside world.

My mind was rife with suspicion. Just then, I felt a pair of hands on my shoulders. I didn't have to look up to know who they belonged to.

“Don’t tell me that you’re planning to use her to trick everyone,” Wolf rumbled in a low tone. His words sounded hoarse, like he was stifling his emotions. He shot the chief a glare that was just as intimidating as his voice... No, even more so.

The chief, however, didn’t bat an eyelash. His amber eyes in their wrinkled sockets were home to calm conviction.

“Nobody will follow a foreign princess...but they’ll obey a goddess,” Wolf asserted. “Is that your game?!”

The chief made no excuses. “Yes.”

A twitch in Wolf’s hands let me know how shocked he was. He must not have expected the chief to come clean so readily. The next moment, his grip on my shoulders tightened.

“That’ll only bring misery to us all!” Wolf snapped.

“Do you have any other ideas?” the chief replied with composure.

At that, Wolf lost his tongue.

“She’s a good person,” the chief said, “friendlier and more compassionate than you could hope for a noblewoman to be. With time, she could prove to be a wonderful master for us. But time is exactly what we do not have. Our tribe has precious little of it left.”

I had a few things to say about his overly glowing review of me, but something else he’d said caught my interest even more. *They don’t have much time left? So my hypothesis is right?* I wanted to question him and find out, but it would’ve been wrong to interrupt their conversation at this point.

“You think I don’t know that?! Yeah, we’ve got no time, and our only option is to take drastic measures. But! This is *wrong*,” Wolf said with great emotion. As he continued though, he gradually regained his calm. “Most of us Khuer are stubborn and stuck in our ways, but we’re kind enough to forgive almost anything. However, not when it comes to the goddess. If it’s revealed that we abused the name of our esteemed goddess to con everyone, that won’t be forgiven, ever. It’ll drive a permanent wedge between our people. I can’t let you do that to Mary... I can’t let our master shoulder that burden.”

I sat bolt upright when I heard him say “our master” in such a grave tone of voice. I hadn’t responded to his offer yet. Well, actually, since the moment I’d said that I *couldn’t* become their master, I’d resigned myself to them assuming that I’d turned the offer down. But Wolf’s voice was clear, unwavering, and assured, as if what I’d said was irrelevant.

The chief repeated Wolf’s words. “Hmm, ‘our master’?” It wasn’t like he was mocking the idea, more like he was mulling it over.

“What?” Wolf asked.

“So you’ve made your decision,” said the chief.

Wolf’s expression suggested that the chief’s statement had taken him by surprise, but his discomposure vanished immediately, and he nodded, looking serious.

The chief’s expression relaxed a little. “I see,” he murmured softly and with more tenderness than I’d expected.

“Father...”

“Don’t worry. I’ll take all the responsibility myself.”

“Huh?” I blurted out quietly, taken aback by the sudden change of topic.

The chief turned to look at me. “Your Highness, I apologize for asking, but I’d like you to take part in a little farce.”

“Um, what do you...?”

“All that you have to do is pretend to be our goddess. For the performance to be convincing, I’d like to give the impression that you have some mysterious powers... Do you have any suggestions?”

I couldn’t keep up with the fast-paced developments in the conversation.

“Uuuh, a strange power...?” I asked in confusion, racking my brain for an idea. But then I soon hit upon one. “Well...I suppose I do have something, if you’re okay with it being just for show.”

I’d remembered the bag that hung from my waist and the objects I’d kept inside for my entire journey to Flanmer.

The chief nodded with satisfaction. “Splendid.”

By contrast, I could feel a surge of indescribable dread welling up inside me.

The Sorcerers' Hunch

Smash.

While I was gathering up some documents on the desk in my room, I heard the sound of something shattering. I turned to follow the noise.

“Argh...” Lutz was pressing a hand on his forehead in a display of regret. He heaved a sigh and then crouched down. Scattered shards of glass from a broken cup were strewn around his feet.

His elbow must’ve bumped into the cup that had been on his desk, knocking it down. Fortunately, it had been mostly empty, but...

“Wasn’t that your favorite? What a waste.”

Lutz had fallen in love with the clear-blue cup the moment he’d laid eyes on it in a storefront. He’d purchased it then and there.

Lutz glared at me resentfully, his brow furrowed. “Yeah, all right. I’m pretty upset already, so cut me some slack.”

He had a point. It wouldn’t have broken if he’d been more careful, but even so, it wasn’t on purpose. I shouldn’t have reproached him as he, the cup’s owner, was the one most upset by the loss.

“Sorry,” I apologized.

Lutz smiled as though I hadn’t really offended him at all. “It’s fine,” he replied, looking a little embarrassed.

“Hopefully they still sell it.”

“I doubt it,” countered Lutz as he wistfully stroked the painted side of a shard. “It can’t be easy to get the blue this perfect.”

The color was as vivid and complex as the clear sky reflected on the sea... The color matched the eyes of that person who mattered so much to us.

Lutz was gazing at the shard in his hands, and his thoughts must’ve been in

alignment with my own. “I wonder how she’s doing.”

It was clear to me who “she” was.

“She’s doing fine, you’ll see,” I told him, but that was more wishful thinking than conviction.

She’d been by our side since the day we’d met her. To us, she was special. We’d never been apart for this long before, and I couldn’t keep my mind at rest. Subconsciously, I’d scan the greenhouse for her each time I entered, and the realization that she was gone would bring with it a feeling of despondency.

Lutz buried his head in his knees and muttered weakly, “Ohhh, why didn’t we just go with her.”

“‘Couldn’t,’ you mean.” If I could’ve, I would’ve wanted to go with her, but that hadn’t been a practical option. Not in my wildest dreams would they let burgeoning, unstable sorcerers like us out of the country. And if we wanted to have a home in the Kingdom of Nevel, if we wanted to keep this place safe, then we had to adhere to the pledge we had made.

“I’m worried about her,” Lutz stated. “You don’t think she’s getting herself into danger, do you?”

“Come on, it’s just a normal trip out. Bad stuff pretty much never happens.” I lost my confidence the moment I said it aloud. *It doesn’t... D-Does it?*

The probability of encountering danger on a normal voyage was low. That was what I wanted to believe. But somehow, the princess had a higher rate of running into trouble. On top of that, she was selfless and couldn’t go without lending a helping hand to those in need. I could imagine her plunging herself headfirst into danger, and I grew even more anxious.

“You picked the wrong time to look like you don’t believe what you’re saying!” Lutz howled, jumping to his feet.

“Well, it’s *her* we’re talking about...”

“No, no, no!!! Ohhh, now I’m more worried than I was before!” Lutz lamented. “Someone that cute trotting around... Won’t somebody kidnap her? What if she’s already been abducted?!”

“Who would?!”

“What if some middle-aged guy falls for her and tries to make her his wife...? That’s it, I can’t stand it anymore. I’m going to save her.”

Lutz snatched his jacket from the back of his chair and tried to leave the room, but I quickly grabbed him by the collar.

“Stop, stop, stop!” I exclaimed. “You’re letting your imagination run wild. Just quit it and think for a minute.”



“How can you be so sure it’s only my imagination? It’s not just her face that’s cute... The princess has an amazing personality too. She can be a little dense at times, and that’s what’s so adorable about her. Can you say definitively that there’s no man in the world who would reach out of his league and take a liking to her?”

Averting my eyes, I said nothing. I couldn’t declare with any certainty that Lutz’s biased view was clouding his judgment. The princess was openhearted despite her comely appearance. She was a great girl who made no distinctions between class or social boundaries, and she was considerate as well. Her character was resolute, but she still had a defenseless side to her, and that was part of what made her so attractive. It wouldn’t be strange at all if a man lost control of himself when around someone like her.

“What if she’s been taken somewhere strange and she’s crying to herself?” I asked. “Lutz, she might be asking *right now* for us to help her. No, she *is*!”

“She isn’t.” Lutz denied what I said, suddenly calm.

“How do you know that?!” I snapped.

“Well, y’know? If she really has been abducted, I can’t imagine her just weeping and waiting for help to arrive.”

I knew that he was right.

“I think she’d probably work out a plan to remedy the situation and put it into action,” Lutz mumbled, his eyes vacant.

“Ah, yeah. She can be a little too proactive.”

I would’ve preferred for the princess to put her own safety first, but at the same time, one of the things that I liked about her was that she would keep fighting without giving up, no matter how unfavorable the odds.

“I hope she remembers how to use the stones we gave her,” Lutz said. He must’ve been referring to the amulets that we’d gifted her before she’d left on her journey. The stones were small, but we’d handed them over with the hope that they’d keep her safe.

“It’d be best if she doesn’t have to.”

Giving her the amulets didn't make us any less anxious. We were ardently awaiting her return...wishing to see her smile happily at us and say, "I'm home."

The Reincarnated Princess's Determination

The next morning, in the square situated in the center of the village, a large crowd had gathered. Confused chatter could be heard, as no one was sure why they'd been summoned out of the blue.

I was watching everyone from a spot a little distance away. *How did it come to this?* I wondered, and not for the first time. This question had been bouncing around my mind since the night before, but I still couldn't come up with an answer.

I couldn't convince myself that the chief's plan was a good one. Certainly, he was right to instigate some kind of change to counteract the Khuer's current stagnation, and I understood that the tribe's conservative tendencies demanded that he take a forceful approach.

But...the approach he'd chosen was just too terrible.

If the Khuer learned about this deception, it would surely drive a wedge between the chief and the villagers. No matter how righteous the intentions were, abusing the object of the Khuer's reverence would cause problems down the road. The chief's only aim was to fix the present situation, and he wasn't considering the feelings of his tribespeople at all.

"That'll only bring misery to us all!" Wolf had argued, and I was sure that he was right.

Wolf was standing beside me. I glanced up at him and observed that he was staring at the crowd with a stiff expression. However, there was a fearsome intensity in his piercing eyes.

On my other side, Lily seemed worried. I shot her a quick look and a reassuring smile, but since I'd failed to purge myself of worry, it must've shown on my face. Her expression only darkened further. She cast her head down, and I began to stare at my own feet too, unable to think of what to say to her.

But then, the crowd's murmuring grew louder, and my head shot back up. The

villagers parted, forming an opening and revealing the chief on the other side. All eyes were on him.

“Chief, why’d you call us here first thing in the morn—” A man began to complain with dissatisfaction, or perhaps trepidation, but the chief motioned for silence with his hand. The man stopped talking, and the crowd followed suit.

The chief walked through the gap in the crowd and came to a stop in the middle of the square. He spun his head around, his eyes roving over each one of the gathered people. The air was thick with tension, and I broke out in goose bumps. My nervousness grew with each passing second of silence, and the sensation was suffocating.

“Good morning.”

My eyes widened at the chief’s choice of words to break the long silence.

The gathered people seemed stunned as well. A few of them returned the greeting in confused mumbles.

“Rotten old man...” Wolf muttered with a look of exasperation.

“I apologize for calling you all out so early in the morning. I know this is when the women are most busy. When we’re done here, you have my permission to give your husbands a good kicking so that they get off their lazy butts and make themselves useful.”

The apprehensive looks vanished from the women, and they began to giggle. “Oh, let up,” said some of the men, but they were laughing as well. The mood had lightened and everybody looked more relaxed, which was almost certainly what the chief had intended.

“Nobody likes to listen to an old man drone on, but this matter cannot be summed up shortly, so please bear with me for a little while.” The chief left a pause after that opener before continuing. “This concerns the future of our tribe.”

The audience began to look tense once more. Their expressions weren’t unnecessarily stiff, but it was clear that they were concentrating. In spite of the situation, I was amazed by the chief’s skill in crowd control.

“Our tribe began its existence roughly six hundred years ago. It is said that our origin was a single woman. Not only was she an expert in medicine, but she also possessed rare powers. She could grow trees and plants in an instant and cure injuries and diseases with her touch.”

This was the legend of the goddess that I’d heard about from Lily. The tale did seem very dubious due to the lack of surviving written records from that time, which meant that her story persisted solely through an oral tradition. It sounded rather like a fairy tale. Even so, I believed it was true. Perhaps exaggerations had crept in here and there, but I expected that those events had really happened.

However, I had another theory about the goddess’s origin—I suspected that the female founder of the Khuer was not a goddess, but rather, a sorceress.

Caressing someone to cure their injury is something Michael can do. And the Khuer’s legend says that the goddess could spur plants to grow...so it sounded like their goddess had earth-affinity magic, just like him.

“We Khuer inherited the blood that ran through her veins and have kept it pure over the centuries. But the miraculous powers that our bloodline once carried have waned over time, finally disappearing over a hundred years ago. There is not a soul in this village who has inherited the goddess’s powers.”

A stifling silence overcame the crowd.

“Tell me then, why have we continued to keep that blood pure?”

“Chief!” a man of over fifty shouted. He was apparently unable to bear listening any longer, though he didn’t exactly sound angry. It was more like he was pleading, *“Please, don’t say what you’re about to.”*

The chief, however, slowly shook his head, making it clear that he had no intention of stopping. “We are far past the point of being able to avert our eyes from this problem. Our loathing of change and our unwillingness to break free from tradition has cost us all too dearly.”

The man grimaced, as if in pain, and fell silent.

“At its height, our tribe numbered over a thousand, but now there are fewer than two hundred of us. Moreover, most of us are elderly, like me, and the

number of children declines further every year. Before long, we will go extinct.”

“You don’t know that for sure!” shouted an elderly man. “Don’t say things like that or you’ll scare the younger ones!”

There was a woman by that old man’s side, and she was around the same age as him. It was her, not the chief, who chastised the old man. “Enough, dear. We oldies ought to know better than anyone what the chief is trying to tell us... Not a day has gone by that I forget our child, who perished without letting out a cry.”

“Dear...”

“We had so much trouble bringing a child into this world, and then he came along, our cute little boy. He had your eyes and my ears. If he’d been stronger when he was born, he’d probably be here smiling with us now...”

Several people around the old couple dropped their eyes to the floor with mournful expressions. Perhaps they’d each lost someone too.

A young woman raised her hand. “Chief, if we...if we marry outside the village, will our children be born stronger?” She asked this with a pleading tone in her voice. “Will nobody else have to know the pain of burying their own child?”

The chief looked saddened as he gazed at her, but after a brief pause, he slowly shook his head. “I don’t know.”

I’d taken the chief to be a “the ends justify the means” sort of person, but I’d been wrong. He didn’t blur the facts. Saying yes to the young woman’s question might’ve swayed some of the villagers, but he was above offering empty promises. He was a sincere person, I just knew it.

“It isn’t clear why it’s become harder in our tribe to conceive,” said the chief, “or why the children that *are* born are sickly and die young. Children take after their parents, and it’s possible that they inherit infirmities from them as well, but there’s no proof. So we won’t know whether children conceived with one outsider parent will be any stronger... Not until such a child is born.” Essentially, the chief was saying that he couldn’t make any promises for the future.

The crowd once more erupted into murmurs. But the image that seared itself

foremost into my memory was that of Rolf staring straight forward...straight at the chief.

“It’s daunting to make a change when there’s so much we do not know,” the chief continued. “But unless we do, we’ll *never* know.”

I heard someone gasp. I glanced to my side and saw that Lily was clasping her hands together in front of her chest.

“We mustn’t let the children pay for our generation’s choices. What good will come of forcing them to adhere to traditions that have lost all meaning, entombing them in our tiny little world, and leaving them a future filled with nothing but graves to dig? The children have a right to choose their own future,” the chief declared with resolution.

I stared at him, not saying anything. This was nowhere near as bad as what I’d imagined. When I’d first heard the chief’s plan, I’d pictured a scene far more loathsome—the chief would compel the tribe to obey by invoking the goddess’s name without sparing a thought for how the tribe felt. But instead, the chief was trying to change their minds by presenting his argument at length in an honest, direct manner.

Where exactly do I come in here? Seems to me that the fake goddess isn’t needed.

The villagers were exchanging uncertain glances with each other. I could tell that the chief had won over more than a few of them. That said, nobody was in any hurry to voice their agreement. That made sense when I gave it a little thought—they’d been asked to rapidly repeal centuries’ worth of firmly upheld traditions. It was not a decision to be made lightly. Plus, change was scary. It took an extraordinary amount of courage to brave the unknown.

At any rate, the matter was too important to settle in a day or two. But, I had a feeling that the longer they left it, the less they’d be inclined to budge from their initial stand.

After racking my brain for a while, the answer leaped out at me. “Oh, so that’s it...” I accidentally said out loud. *That’s why he needs a fake goddess.* The chief had chosen to dirty his hands with deception to give the reluctant tribespeople a nudge in the right direction.

“We Khuer need to change,” stated the chief. “I believe that it was fate that brought Her Highness to our village in our moment of need, now that our end is upon us.”

Once the chief had finished speaking, everyone focused their attention on me. It was quite intimidating to have a sea of eyes all point to me in unison. Overcome by the pressure, I tried to take a step back, but Wolf gently put his hand on my back and kept me there. I can’t express how reassuring that gesture was.

That’s right. I’m not alone.

“Your Highness, would you come over here?” The chief beckoned.

I gulped, took a deep breath, and then started to walk toward him. Positioning myself by the chief’s side, I turned to face the crowd. I could feel every pair of eyes piercing me. My heart was practically jumping out of my chest.

The chief had agitated the crowd by summoning me.

“Chief, don’t tell us you’re planning to do what the boy Wolf proposed?!” one person exclaimed.

“Wolf’s proposal...?” said another. “You mean welcoming the princess as our master?”

On the day that we’d arrived in the village, Wolf had proposed to make me the tribe’s master, but he’d been flatly rejected. Everyone had decried the idea as outlandish nonsense, and they’d refused to even contemplate the notion. But right now, the villagers must’ve felt like that dreaded, ridiculous idea wasn’t as impossible as they’d hoped.

The chief refrained from giving a direct answer to the uneasy villager’s question. Instead, he asked a question of his own. “What are your feelings about the princess after living side by side with her over this short period of time?”

The villagers looked at each other.

“Well... I’d have to say she’s a great person,” said one.

“She’s better humored than a merchant’s daughter, let alone a noble, and she’s kind too,” added another. “But that’s irrelevant.”

I was surprised by their high opinion of me, but now wasn’t the time to congratulate myself on that. As they’d said, a favorable reception was irrelevant to the question of whether they’d accept me as their master.

Undeterred and unshaken, the chief prompted them for more. “Is that all?”

“The princess is extremely knowledgeable,” one person answered. “She’s cooked meals that I’ve never seen before, and they’re absolutely delicious as well.”

“Oh, yeah, the one she shared with us?” said a man. “Spurry, was it? I did love that.” He must’ve been thinking of the dish’s distinctive taste, which caused him to jumble up the words “spicy” and “curry.”

“It’s *curry*,” Rolf corrected, rolling his eyes.

Wow, you remembered the name! Actually, it makes sense. You made a fuss about it not being edible, but after you tried the curry, you liked it so much that you asked for seconds.

“And she knows her stuff when it comes to medicinal herbs too,” the man continued. “We never had to tell her how often each of the herbs needs watering... She just knew.”

“Right. I wouldn’t be surprised if she knows more about herbs than the average small-village herbalist.”

They’re giving me too much credit. I only know about a small fraction of all herbs, and I only know a few of their uses. My knowledge is hopelessly amateurish compared to the people of the Khuer tribe.

However, nobody present objected. They were all clamoring to praise me.

Maybe acting like a normal person has had a disproportionately positive effect on their opinion of me. After all, they had expected practically nothing from an outsider and a princess. I’m pretty sure I’ve read about this before... It leaves a stronger impression when someone behaves contrary to their expected behavior.

If I cut out the exaggerations, then at best, I could say that I was friendly *for a princess* and I knew a lot *for a little girl*.

Once the chief had allowed everyone to have their say, he slowly began to speak. “It’s already remarkable that our unexpected visitor turned out to be a foreign princess who’s kind of heart and entirely free from conceit. And then, in addition to that, she’s had a thorough education in medicine. Should we not consider that this is more than just a coincidence?”

He now sounded less like a straitlaced old curmudgeon and more like the narrator from a play.

“This world is home to many countries and many people,” the chief continued. “There are kings who are deaf to the petitions of their subjects. There are nobles who lavish themselves with luxuries without any care for the plight of the common folk. There are bureaucrats who frantically try to line their own pockets, and merchants who are all too happy to help them. This world is full of proud, ruthless people. And in the midst of all that, we have had the good fortune to encounter someone truly unique—Her Highness.”

Everyone was listening to the chief’s sonorous voice with rapt attention. I felt like I was observing an audience on the edge of their seats watching a play that was about to reach its climax. I was supposed to be the central figure of this story, but I was just a spectator, one on the outside looking in... And I was feeling rather self-conscious.

“I believe that it was our goddess’s will for us to meet her. And that, perhaps, this is her deliverance to save us from our decline.”

This statement caused a great commotion; the villagers had seemed shocked before, but that couldn’t compare to their present reaction. Mentioning the goddess obviously had a powerful effect.

“So the princess is...an angel?”

“Don’t be ridiculous! She’s *foreign* royalty. She can’t possibly be an angel sent by our goddess.”

“But there *is* something different about her. She knows far more than any royal has a right to.”

Everyone's eyes fell on me.

I hurriedly shook my head. "I'm not an angel from your goddess!" I exclaimed, desperately trying to deny it. "I'm nothing so spectacular as that!" *Me, an angel? Talk about blasphemy! Just to be clear, I'm a vulgar heathen with nothing on my mind except how I can become Sir Leonhart's bride!*

"But, Your Highness," said the chief, "according to my son, you eradicated a disease that was spreading among sailors. Tales about the Dew of the Sea have made it all the way to our country, you know?"

"Dew of the Sea?" asked a woman. "Isn't that the remedy someone brought here on their way back from that port town? The fact that it can be preserved for long periods of time without being dried is amazing enough on its own."

"Wait, the princess made that?!" asked a man.

The crowd's eyes widened and then gradually began to sparkle. Their excited looks left me feeling more uncomfortable than proud. It felt like I was about to be crushed beneath the weight of their expectations.

"My son also told me that you can treat injuries and emergency illnesses."

"What?!" I blurted out. *No, I can't! I can only manage extremely basic first aid! This has gone way past exaggeration—it's outright false testimony!* The chief's assertion flummoxed me. I was too shocked to form an immediate response and could only stand there opening and shutting my mouth like a goldfish in a pond.

Regardless, the conversation continued.

"The princess can treat injuries? But a normal noble girl would faint at the sight of blood!"

"Treating emergency illnesses? Amazing. Even doctors have trouble with those when they're starting out."

Hold on, I'm not that amazing! I almost protested, but the chief stared straight into my eyes, and I instinctively stopped myself. Instead, I gulped.

"You possess knowledge and capabilities beyond what should be possible for someone of your age and upbringing. It seems to me that your very existence is

a miracle.”

I wanted to object, but the chief’s piercing gaze overwhelmed me and I couldn’t think straight. I looked away to escape him, but that caused me to realize that everyone else was staring at me as well. Their passionate gazes sent a chill running down my spine.

More and more of the crowd were losing their grip on rationality, caught up by the chief’s speech and the passion of their neighbors. I felt like a cult was forming around me as the crowd became more receptive.

His plan is working. Right now, they might buy the illusion.

I pursed my lips and tightened my grip on the stones that I held in my hand. *If I use these, I’ll become the goddess in their eyes, for a time at least. Although this definitely isn’t what I wanted.* I could understand why the chief was taking such drastic measures. Even so, I didn’t agree with them, but I couldn’t come up with any alternatives. Besides, if there was such a thing as a clean solution to this problem, then it would’ve been solved long ago.

My thoughts were going around in circles, and all the while, the time limit drew nearer. Would I become the goddess? The decision had to be made now. But the more I panicked, the more jumbled my thoughts became.

My heart was screaming that it didn’t want this, but my head rebutted with the opposite answer: I would be simultaneously saving the Khuer from their future downfall *and* bringing excellent doctors under my control. That had to be the right answer.

“Your Highness, are you not the second coming of our goddess?” the chief asked.

Upon hearing him, the crowd grew tense. They were all waiting for my answer with bated breath.

I tensed up my legs, fearing that I’d collapse otherwise.

There’s no turning back now. If I’ve decided to become their goddess, then I need to see it through to the end. Half measures will only break their trust and ruin any potential of saving them. If I’m gonna do this, my act will have to be flawless.

I took a deep breath, imagining that I was kick-starting my oxygen-starved brain. Thanks to that, I felt like I could see a little clearer, and I looked across the faces of the crowd, seeing hope, excitement, and fanaticism.

Everything's ready, I thought. It'll work. I'm sure they'll buy it.

And yet, my words stuck in my throat, and the emotions that I'd been holding back all exploded at once.

You're gonna trick them? Is that really the right choice?

Would I not regret deceiving these honest people who live their lives with earnest devotion to their goddess? Could I take advantage of the knowledge and techniques they've inherited from their ancestors to save countless lives with a clean conscience? Is there no better option? What exactly is it that I came here to do?

The Future Chief's Elation

Despite the large number of people present, everything was deathly silent. However, the sense of excitement among the crowd was still just as stifling—if anything, the feeling had increased. Everyone was staring at her in silence, their eyes filled with passion.

Everyone must've *wanted* to believe my father's story. Otherwise, they wouldn't be simpleminded enough to let the chief shape their opinions so easily. They yearned for the goddess to exist, for her to change our fate and prevent our destruction, so this group of fully grown adults was placing the responsibility for their problems on a little girl. "Bizarre" was the only word to describe it.

The burden of this village's future was about to fall on Mary, even though she was guilty of nothing, didn't deserve it, and had no responsibility to accept.

But I, of all people, had no right to feel angry about her treatment. After all, I was the one who'd brought her here, and the one who'd proposed that she become our tribe's master. I was guilty of that—it was my responsibility.

Despite that, I was now fighting the urge to run over to her and snatch her up. I wanted nothing more than to take her somewhere far away from anything that could trouble her.

"Wolf," called the girl standing by my side, snapping me out of my thoughts.

"Yeah, Lily?"

I must've started clenching my fists at some point, and blood was now flowing from my palms where my nails had dug into the skin. I looked at her, trying to appear calm, but her gaze was pointed elsewhere. Her eyes were fixed on Mary.

"I didn't like her at first," admitted Lily.

"You didn't...?"

"No. I couldn't. She was just so pretty. It felt like she belonged to an entirely

different world from me. And she was a princess, so I thought that she had everything she could ever want and didn't know what worry or suffering felt like."

I could understand. Mary's appearance was the very picture of what young girls imagine when they think of fairy-tale princesses. It was tempting to assume that she'd spent her days free from all of life's troubles. But Mary wasn't a gem in a jewelry box; she wasn't a flower or a butterfly that one would find in a greenhouse.

"When we tried to keep her at arm's length, she took a step toward us," Lily continued. "She'd take part in the fieldwork, help out with the housework. She let her pretty hands and gorgeous hair get covered in mud, and it didn't bother her. She still showed us that kind smile of hers." Lily rarely showed any outward signs of emotion, but a faint smile had crept onto her lips. "I think she'd be a great master for our tribe. She wouldn't just keep us safe—she'd protect what makes us proud as well. But I don't want that... Not if it'll make her look as upset as she does now."

"Lily..."

"They're all crowding her, swarming her, but not one of them can see that she's on the verge of tears," Lily said quietly. She looked teary herself. "We can't do that to her."

I followed her gaze and my eyes found Mary. Her head was tilted slightly down and her complexion was awfully pale. She looked like she might collapse at any second. "*No more,*" I was about to shout.

That's enough. You don't have to shoulder the heavy burden of our future.

But the moment before I could speak, Mary's expression changed. Her complexion still looked pale, but she'd pursed her lips and faced forward, and I could see determination burning in her eyes.

After taking a deep breath, she slowly said, "There's something that I have to tell you all."

There was a slight tremble in her voice, but everyone was too overcome with excitement to notice...except for Lily and me. All that the two of us could do

was watch from a distance.

“It’s important,” said Mary. “But before I speak, there’s something I’d like you all to see.” When she finished speaking, Mary held her arms out.

She was holding something in each hand. Two small somethings. Mary slowly uncurled her fingers, revealing two little stones, one sitting on each open palm. One stone was a deep red, and the other a light blue. Both shone like jewels.

The night before, Mary had called them magical gems. These were precious stones that a sorcerer could create by imbuing them with power, and they allowed their bearer to use magic. However, each stone could only be used once. The other downside was that magical gems only worked for sorcerers.

However, Mary’s gems were different. Anybody could use them, but the power that they offered was merely an imitation of true magic—they lacked the punch and firepower of the real deal. In other words, the gems were just for show.

Apparently, the people who’d given her the gems had told her, “They’re only good for a distraction, so save them for the right moment.”

I know Mary was planning to use those stones to give a performance as a goddess, but is it really okay for her to show their power here?

“They’re certainly pretty stones, but what are they exactly?” asked a man, seeming suspicious.

Mary smiled at him, and then she gripped the stones tightly and slammed them together.

The stones hadn’t looked brittle, but they shattered with a loud noise, and shards flew everywhere. As the stunned crowd watched, the outlines of the airborne shards twisted out of shape. They dissolved into the air and, the moment before they vanished entirely, burst into flames. The small balls of fire gathered together and shrouded Mary’s body in a huge crimson inferno.

“Aaaaah!”

The sight took even my breath away, and I knew it was just for show. The crowd was none the wiser, and they were letting out shrill screams.

But the next moment, the massive ball of fire froze solid, and the dancing tendrils of flame turned to ice without losing their shape. Everything around Mary was frozen, from the tips of her toes to the top of her head. The sight of her there, encased in an ice sculpture shaped like flames, was spine-chillingly beautiful... It could even be called divine.

However, the miraculous ice sculpture persisted for only the blink of an eye before it broke. With a crash, the ice shattered and scattered all around. The flakes of ice glistened in the sunlight, and they looked more like specks of light than ice. Mary was covered in them, and she shone exactly like a goddess should. It was like a dream.

Everyone stood dead still, simply enchanted by the magical sight. Nobody in the crowd was wondering why this had just happened or what meaning it held—I was certain of that. People don't ask why jewels exist or what they mean. When faced with true beauty, words fail us. That's what a voice in the corner of my mind told me.

"Where I come from, we call that magic."

Mary's quiet voice brought my head back into working order, back to reality. I could hear shallow intakes of breath from spots in the crowd. It seemed that her words had snapped several other people out of their trances as well.

"I can't use magic, so what you saw a second ago was just a sham, but real magic *does* exist, and it's a miraculous power available to just a handful of people. We call them sorcerers. Different sorcerers can control different kinds of magic, and there are many varieties, like fire magic, ice magic, and so on. In particular, there's a kind called earth-affinity magic. This can accelerate the growth of plants and close up wounds, among other things."

I expected that most of the crowd was struggling to keep up with Mary's words. In truth, so was I. The moment she lifted the curtains on her trick, she'd completely broken from the plan. *So she was never planning to put on a fake performance as a goddess?* I thought, bewildered. *Then what's the point of this? What's she hoping to achieve with her all-too-marvelous spectacle?*

But, as I listened to her, it began to make sense in bits and pieces. She'd said that earth-affinity sorcerers could accelerate the growth of plants and close up

wounds. I wasn't the only one who was beginning to figure out the implication. At the very least, the handful of people whose expressions had grown stiff were probably on the same page.

"One of my friends is like that. He can heal injuries by holding his hand over them... Just like your goddess."

Mary didn't explicitly state her conclusion, but the implication was as clear as if she'd said it out loud: our goddess was a person, no different from us. The shock that ran through the crowd was immeasurable. I'd seen the sorcerer heal a knight with my own eyes, and even I hadn't connected the dots between his power and our goddess.

How could I though? Nobody would consider that the deity they worshiped might be the same kind of entity as someone they'd met in real life...even if the two had one thing in common. Gods are gods because they transcend us, because they're beyond our reach.

And we'd been so proud of our divine bloodline. It wasn't just our laws that kept us from accepting marriages from outside the village. No, even though our extinction was imminent, the Khuer's pride had gotten in the way. Deep within our hearts, we'd been convinced by the delusion that we were special.

"Sorcerers aren't found outside of Nevel anymore, but centuries ago, they apparently existed in all corners of the world. It's my belief that the Khuer tribe's goddess was an earth-affinity sorceress. It's said that the number of people capable of using magic has dwindled over the years. I think that's the reason why the miraculous power was lost to your tribe."

"Enough, please!" Someone's screaming voice cut Mary off. It belonged to a man of over sixty, who was covering his ears so that he didn't have to hear any more of what Mary was saying. He was Lily's great-uncle.

I knew all too well that Mary wasn't trying to upset anyone, but the goddess had been the pillar of support for the village. Having that taken away without warning induced nothing but fear.

"But—"

"We get it, you don't want to be our master. So just stop... Why tell us all

this? Are you trying to insult us?!”

It wasn't Mary that countered him. Lily shook her head and shouted in a voice louder than I'd ever heard from her. "Y-You're wrong! That's not it, uncle! She's telling us that it's not our fault that we lost our miraculous power. She's saying that there's nothing we could've done, and we're not to blame, so there's no need to let our traditions hold us back anymore... That's what she's telling us."

"Lily..." The old man stared at her, looking startled. Lily had probably never argued with him before.

I was surprised as well since I'd also never heard her voice her own opinions like that.

"I wouldn't lose even a bit of respect for the goddess if she really was a human," declared Lily. "I can still hold my head high and say that she's the pride of my tribe. Can't you, uncle?"

"I..." The old man cast his head down, and so did several of the people around him, looking ashamed.

"I'm sorry for talking about something so upsetting," Mary apologized with a gentle tone of voice. A suffocating silence enveloped everyone else. "But I remembered something that made it impossible for me to keep quiet."

"Remembered what...?" Lily asked, cocking her head.

"I came to this country to save people suffering from disease."

I heard gasps. The look on the old man's face, on Lily's and everyone else's, changed.

"I'm not asking for help from a tribe that may or may not have miraculous powers... I'm asking for help from *you*, from doctors with a wealth of knowledge and a tried-and-true skill set."

I was so engrossed in Mary's speech that I forgot to breathe.

"Perhaps you think that I'm just an ignorant outsider and that I should mind my own business, but in my eyes, your tribe has done a fantastic job of upholding the most precious gift your goddess handed down to you."

She's right. Our inheritance, what we have to pass down to future

generations, isn't some miraculous power—it's our methods of making medicines, our knowledge, our skills...and our burning desire to save our patients. Being a doctor... That's what the goddess and our ancestors perfected and passed down to us. That's what I'm most proud of.

Longing for a power long since lost won't save anybody. What sort of poor excuse for a doctor pins their hopes on something that might not even exist? That's tantamount to spitting in the faces of everyone whose lives we've saved so far.

"A disease is in the process of spreading in the Kingdom of Vint. I want to get it under control using whatever means necessary, and I can't do it without your help." Mary bowed her head low. "Please, lend me your assistance."

Her plea would've swayed the heart of even the most stubborn person in the world. For the first time in my life, I understood what it felt like for my heart to skip a beat.

In this closed-off village, I'd counted the number of graves each time another was dug. I'd traveled the world, keeping out of sight, but I'd still been discovered and hunted like I was some exotic animal.

In a village I'd once visited, the child I'd come to help had died. The parents had been furious that I hadn't arrived in time. They'd piled up gold in front of me and said, "Isn't this enough?!" I'd hated how powerless I was. There'd been nothing that I could do for the newly departed child except apologize.

And in the village itself, I couldn't change even a single person's mind.

The miraculous tribe? Yeah, right. As if someone as pathetic as me could have any miraculous power.

Each time I'd heard that phrase, my heart had been filled with bitterness, not pride. The name had traveled far and wide, and it crushed me with the weight of expectations that it had fostered. I'd begun to forget what it was that made me proud. But it still lived within me... As long as I was driven by the desire to save lives, I'd never lose my pride as a Khuer. *She* had taught me that.

Thank you, Mary.

How do I describe the emotion I have right now? What name do I give to this

feeling that's welling up inside my heart? I was overcome by a strange feeling that left me unsure of whether I wanted to shout to the heavens or fall to my knees and weep. It was like I was in an entirely new world with bright new colors. The houses and fields and everything that I'd known my whole life suddenly looked so precious.

Mary...I'm glad that I met you.

Everything grew silent once more, but this time, it did not feel so bad. Some people were moved, and some were distraught. But amid the group of people gawking at each other with confusion, Rolf took one step forward... Just a single step, but a step nonetheless. Everybody else was frozen in place, so when he did, it was as momentous as if he'd set foot in uncharted territory. At that moment, his small body seemed a little bigger than it really was.

"Count me in," he said briefly, twisting the corners of his lips into a cocksure smile. "I'm going with you. I'm just a kid, so I won't make much of a difference, but I can help. Tell me anything, I'll do it."

"Uuuh?" Mary blurted, stunned. Rolf's offer had probably surprised her more than it had anyone else here.

Rolf's smile broadened when he saw her confused expression. Then, his face took on a look more dignified than I could've ever imagined possible from him. He put his hand over his heart and bowed his head. "I'll do your bidding, Your Highness."

Rolf's words brought the crowd back to their senses, and their silence was replaced by a flurry of shouts.

"Just a minute, Rolf!" exclaimed his mother. "You can't pledge something like that without thinking!"

"I did think," Rolf replied.

"No, you didn't!" said his father. "Just stay quiet!"

Rolf's parents were grabbing him from either side, holding him back. His mother thumped him on the head and his father grabbed him by the scruff of his neck, but Rolf didn't give in.

“No, I won’t stay quiet! She could’ve pretended to be the goddess and tricked us. In fact, she’s a princess, so really, she could’ve ordered us. But she didn’t. She bowed her head, used her words, and managed to preserve our pride as doctors. She’s talking to us on even footing, as equals, as people. She’s shown us respect, and we need to show her a little respect back.”

Rolf’s parents stopped moving.

The people around Rolf were watching him with a mixture of shock and admiration. Nobody said a word. They were too stubborn to agree with what he’d said right away, but they weren’t so rotten that they could write off his words as childish nonsense. There was no fault in Rolf’s argument. His response to Mary’s plea had been so mature and sincere that it sounded strange coming from the village’s worst problem child. It would’ve been no easy task for anyone present to refute him.

Next to me, Lily raised her hand. “M-Me...” she stuttered, but she eventually forced her words out. “Me too! I’d like to go with you too, if I can.” Lily was gazing at Mary with tear-filled eyes. Then, she gripped her hands together in front of her chest and swung her head from side to side, like she was annoyed about not being able to express her thoughts how she wanted. As her head moved, the tears that had been kept in place by surface tension flew from her eyes and sparkled in the sunlight. They were as dazzlingly bright as the eyes they’d come from.

“No, not ‘if I can.’ I want to go. Please take me with you. I want to live my life in a way that lets me be proud of myself as a doctor. I want to go through life by your side, Lady Mary!”

“Lily...” Mary called Lily’s name in a high-pitched voice choked with emotion. Mary pushed her way through the throng of people, ran toward Lily, and flung her arms around her.

Lily looked shocked for a moment, but soon she was smiling happily. It was the first time I’d ever seen her smile like the other girls her age. The expressions among the crowd grew warmer as everyone watched the two girls hugging.

“This isn’t the reaction I got! It’s not fair!” screamed Rolf.

“Maybe you should’ve been a bit nicer to the princess over the last few days,

eh?” said Rolf’s father, tousling his son’s hair.

“He’s got that right,” agreed someone in the crowd.

“Who does he think he is, expecting the same treatment as Lily? Have a think about the way you always behave and the things you say! Ask yourself why that is, brat.”

“Shut it!”

Laughter erupted all around, and instantly, the mood in the air lightened. Lily and Mary were looking at each other and giggling enthusiastically. It was an ordinary, peaceful sight...but one which we would never have seen if Mary had chosen to become our goddess. It was like a miracle.

I’d only imagined two possible futures for the Khuer: a slow decline to extinction or a division among the tribe. But, whether she’d planned it or not, Mary wasn’t going to let anything slip through her fingers.

“It’s like a miracle,” said my father, as if he’d read my thoughts. I hadn’t noticed him come up beside me. “Most of our tribespeople are conservative and resistant to change. That’s why I planned to force us out of this village. I thought it was for the best... But I was wrong. I underestimated my fellow Khuer, and Her Highness as well.” My father was speaking more to himself, his voice thick with regret and self-loathing. His eyes were vacant, and he wore a bitter smile, but only for a few seconds. He soon wiped the smile away and walked over to Mary. “Your Highness.”

Mary looked around, saw the stern expression on my father’s face, and began to look nervous. She let go of Lily, turned to face my father, stood up straight, and waited for him to speak.

My father bowed his head low.

“Ch-Chief?” asked Mary, jittering.

“It will take more than a bow to make up for compelling you to take part in my impertinent ruse and wounding your pride. But please, allow me to at least apologize. I am terribly sorry for everything I’ve done.”

When she heard what my father had to say, Mary’s brows drooped. She

lowered her eyes and slowly shook her head. “You’ve done nothing to apologize for. After all, ultimately, I was simply unable to change my mind.”

“You’re right, and I didn’t expect that. But as a result, you found the best option.”

“Huh?” Mary’s eyes widened with surprise.

My father raised his head and looked Mary straight in the eyes. “I won’t claim that every single member of our tribe will pledge their loyalty to you. I don’t have the authority to make that decision without discussing it with them. However, we are doctors. Wherever there are sick people, that’s where we’ll go.”

Mary’s eyes lit up with hope as she gazed at the chief. “So you’ll...?”

My father’s lips crinkled, forming a slight smile. “Yes,” he said, and I’d never heard his voice sound so soft. “We’ll do our utmost to make sure that we deserve the respect you’ve shown us and our profession.”

Once my father finished speaking, Mary and Lily both looked at each other. Their faces were overflowing with joy, and they hugged once more. The sight was so lovely that I felt tears coming.

Thank you, my dear master. Thank you for not giving up...for bringing us a happy ending fit for a fairy tale.

I really am so glad to have met you.

The Reincarnated Princess's Shock

I'm glad I didn't give up, I thought.

The members of the Khuer tribe were bounding around the village, and I looked over all of their faces.

I did feel guilty about ruining the chief's plan, especially after he'd gone to the trouble of setting the stage for me to act as the Khuer's goddess. His idea probably would've worked, and my legs had become paralyzed with fear the moment that I'd ditched the plan and followed my heart.

But if I had pretended to be the goddess, then I wouldn't have been able to see the expressions on everyone's faces that I could see now. The Khuer were animated. They were rushing around to prepare, not because a goddess had told them to, but because they were doctors and they wanted to save the sick. Their honey-colored eyes were no longer clouded with resignation and despair but were now burning with determination. When I saw their dignified faces, I felt reassured that I'd made the right choice by not trampling on their pride.

"Your Highness," the chief called to me, snapping me out of my rumination.

"Yes?"

I felt ashamed for getting lost in my thoughts while everyone else was busying themselves, but the chief didn't seem to mind.

"Given the distance to be traveled and the time it will take, I have decided that the younger tribespeople are the ones who should go with you," he explained. "I've told a little over thirty people to prepare to leave, and I've sent the rest of the tribe to fetch medicines and medicinal ingredients from our stores. They'll also gather the tools necessary for treating patients and prepare a few days' worth of food supplies."

"Thank you very much."

"I shall remain in the village in case we need to send extra medicine. Wolf will command the party accompanying you."

“Okay.”

I was a little disappointed that the chief wouldn't be coming with us, but knowing that I'd have Wolf by my side again filled me with confidence. I had absolute faith in his skill as a doctor, but more than that, he'd been a big help so far in keeping my mind positive.

“Everyone is working quickly, so it shouldn't take long to prepare everything for your journey. The only question left is how you'll be traveling.”

A little ways away, I could see that Wolf was busy doing something. The chief called him over, and Wolf handed what he was carrying to a nearby man, then ran up to us. “What do you want? Can't you see that I'm working here?”

“I want you to climb down to the village at the foot of the mountain in advance of everyone else and arrange for carriages,” said the chief.

Wolf frowned and cupped his chin in thought. “We do need to get our transportation figured out... But that village is tiny. The carriages there won't be big enough.”

I didn't know the size of the village in question, but he was probably right. Small agricultural and fishing villages weren't likely to house large carriages. More than thirty people would be traveling, so a couple of normal-sized carriages wouldn't do the trick.

“No, but I never expected that they would be, and we need to act with haste. You'll just have to round up as many horses and carriages as you can and send groups out as they become ready.”

So our only option is to split up and journey in dribs and drabs? But then we'll have a tough time regrouping afterward. We do have a fixed destination—a city on Vint's frontier—but will we really manage to find each other in a world without telephones? And what will we do if we need to change destinations or if we encounter an unexpected problem? How can we adapt to a constantly changing situation? We don't exactly have the luxury of waiting around for letters to arrive in the post...

Just then, I remembered someone. *He* was a rare talent, and he used letters to respond to sudden changes in the situation.

“Need some help?” a voice called out to me.

The timing was so conspicuous that I had to wonder whether he’d read my mind, then swooped in at the opportune moment for maximum dramatic effect. I saw someone pop out from the shadow of a building looking as natural as a native, as if he’d lived here since the day he’d been born. The man walked toward us, giving me a casual wave.

“Hi.”

When I saw him, I froze with a stupid expression on my face. My eyes were wide open and my mouth fell agape. I gawked, unable to reconcile the relaxed way that he was sauntering toward me with the fact that he was a spy. *Aren’t spies supposed to, like, lurk and creep around?! How the hell did nobody spot him?!*

“You’re... But, how?!”

“Ha ha, look at your face!” he said, laughing.

Oh, it’s funny, is it? Whose fault do you think that is?!

“I’m sorry if I’m pulling a weird face!” I said through gritted teeth. “I simply didn’t expect to find you prancing around the village!!!”

“Oh, don’t worry, I was hiding until now. It just seemed like there wasn’t much need for that anymore.” Crow cocked his head, glanced at the chief, and said, “Right?”

The chief didn’t look pleased, but he heaved a sigh. “I did think it unlikely that Her Highness would have nobody here to guard her. I’m disappointed that he managed to completely evade detection...but it is as he says. There’s no need to hide now, since we’ve decided to offer you our assistance.”

“See, what did I tell ya?”

Don’t give me that! And wipe that smug look off your face!

The chief looked disgruntled, and I felt like kneeling down and saying, “*I’m so, so sorry for the behavior of my country’s spy.*”

“Oh, stop that frown, Princess...” Crow laughed, flicking me on the forehead. “You need to show off that pretty face of yours.”

“Why exactly do you think I’m frowning?” I wasn’t sure why he was in such a good mood. I swiped his hand away and shot him a chilly glare, and he clutched at his chest and put on an exaggerated expression of sadness.

“You’re so mean... And after I’ve gone and arranged all sorts of things for you.”

“You... Huh?” *Arranged all sorts of things?* His words had taken me by surprise, and I glanced up at him, dumbfounded. My gaze locked with his eyes, which were the color of fresh wine, and they narrowed as he smiled.

“Didn’t expect that, eh?” Crow asked.

I shook my head honestly.

The fact that he’d made arrangements meant that he’d done so for my benefit. I’d rid myself of the suspicion that he was my adversary a while ago, but I’d never assumed that he was here to help me personally. Crow worked for my father, and looking after me was nothing more than a part of his job. He’d warned me against asking him for more than was necessary, and I hadn’t expected him to have any personal interest in aiding me.

“I didn’t either,” Crow said, joining his hands behind his head. “I didn’t think it mattered to me what you got up to or what you wanted. My only task was keeping you alive until your return to Nevel, and everything else was outside of my job description.”

“So...why?”

“Thanks to you, I got to see something interesting,” replied Crow, before finishing nonchalantly with, “So this is the reward for a good little girl.”

Uuuh, phrasing? I thought, stunned. Strangely though, I didn’t feel annoyed. Perhaps it was because of the delighted smile on Crow’s face. He looked like he was a child who’d pulled off a prank without a hitch, and that was something I’d never seen in *Hidden World*.

“Tiresome,” “Such a hassle,” and “Whatever” had basically been his catchphrases. He’d looked and acted listless as a rule, and his view of the world had often been slanted. Even when he was interested in something, he’d just watch from a safe distance. He wouldn’t take the initiative, and he’d

maintained that stance even after growing closer to the heroine.

So what changed? I wondered, perplexed. However, I was grateful that he'd departed from that stance.

"I'm not sure what it is that you're so chuffed about, but am I safe in thinking that you've arranged for a means of transportation?" asked Wolf.

"Yep... Although all I actually did was get in contact with the Eigel boy. That kid and his friends are talented, so I bet they're arranging for carriages and all that stuff as we speak."

So George and the others are working to help us? So dependable! We have the Eigel family and Lord Julius's vast network of connections, and on top of that, George, negotiator extraordinaire. With all of that, we practically have a small army of allies!

"Pleased?" Crow asked softly, and I thought that his voice sounded a little happy.

"Of course! Thank you, Crow."

The Second Prince's Search

Tugging on my horse's reins, I brought my mount to a stop in a shadowy area. I wanted to take a look at my surroundings. I saw nobody nearby. The place was littered with tree stumps and tall stacks of lumber, along with a few axes, saws, and other tools left behind, but nothing else.

I let out a sigh of relief and approached the scene, careful to avoid the lumber, then glanced up at the trees. Only the canopy was still leafy, and the trunks were bare of branches and leaves below. From the outside, the forest looked like a big, sliced cake.

"Johan," called a voice. I turned around and saw that Nacht had walked up next to me. Glancing around the area, he said, "Nobody here, it seems."

Nacht had previously traveled to the mouth of the forest for an inspection, but that wasn't where we'd chosen to go. Instead, we'd taken a detour around to the eastern side of the forest and had entered from there.

The trail that led deeper into the forest was narrow, but it was supposed to merge with the main path farther along. I'd gathered that information from a third party though, so I couldn't be entirely certain.

"It's a good thing we listened to your advice," Nacht commented, turning to face the previously mentioned third party.

The tall person had been rubbing his horse's belly, and beneath his hood, I could see a smile form on his lips. "It's a pleasure to have been of service to you," he replied modestly. Then, he threw his hood back over his shoulders, revealing a familiar, handsome face. He had coarse, black hair and black almond eyes; imposing eyebrows; and a chiseled nose.

I'd harbored the malicious wish that age would've blighted his good looks...but the new ruggedness I saw had only enhanced his beauty and charm. This was the man that I wanted to catch up to, that I wanted to surpass, and it gave me a headache seeing that his appearance had improved beyond what I

remembered.

Why does he have to always leave me in the dust? I thought, seeking an outlet for my anger. I realized that I'd begun chewing on my lip.

The man—Leonhart—must've noticed me glaring at him because he lowered his pretty eyebrows slightly and his smile became more forced.

Thinking back, I recalled the first part of our plan, when Nacht and I stopped in the town to find a guard. When Leonhart had suddenly appeared before us, I hadn't believed what I was seeing. *Why is the captain of my kingdom's royal guard in a place like this?* I'd wondered.

According to what Leonhart had said, his presence in Vint had been my father's suggestion.

"I had the nerve to sigh in the presence of His Majesty," Leonhart had explained with a smile that was similar to the one he presently wore. I'd found it unlikely that Leonhart would commit a mistake like that while on duty, but his story hadn't seemed like a joke or a lie.

After criticizing Leonhart for his mistake, the king had said, "If you're so tired, then I'll let you have some time off." He'd then ordered Leonhart to Vint for an inspection under the guise of taking a mandatory rest period.

My father was probably interested in finding out about the deforestation, the disease, and Vint's response. Perhaps Leonhart had also been tasked with keeping an eye on me and acting as my guard.

However, while I understood my father's reasoning, I wasn't happy about it—there were plenty of people besides Leonhart who could've done this job, so why was there a need to send Nevel's strongest knight? It wasn't like ferocious beasts were prowling around this forest.

If my sister had been here instead of me, Leonhart's presence might've acted as a check for her behavior—she could often ask too much of herself, but she probably wouldn't have to do anything reckless with him by her side. Unfortunately, as far as I was concerned, the sight of his face made me eager to compete with him. It felt like I'd do *anything* just to show him up or put him in his place. Maybe the king's choice of Leonhart was intended to light a fire under

me.

I was grinding my teeth and shooting Leonhart a curse-filled glare, but he ignored it and turned to face us with a serious look on his face.

“I’ll ask you both again... Do you really want to enter the forest?”

I almost countered his question with one of my own: “*Do you really still need to ask that?*” But I managed to keep my mouth shut because I realized that he was asking if we were prepared to face what might lie ahead.

“Plenty of dangers await inside, and there’s no need for the two of you to do this. If you leave everything to me, I can find out what’s happening in there by myself.”

Certainly, if we entrusted the task to Leonhart, he’d no doubt deliver results above and beyond what we’d expect. Although it pained me to admit, I had to recognize his superior capabilities.

Nacht had fallen silent, and he was crossing his arms with a bitter look on his face. He narrowed his eyes and heaved a long sigh. “That does offer the best chances of success. Johan and I are more likely to hinder you than anything else if we come along. Leaving it to you would be the wiser choice.”

“Nacht!” I called out, hoping to cut him off since it seemed like he was warming up to Leonhart’s suggestion.

However, my expectations turned out to be wrong. “But,” Nacht continued, “I wouldn’t have made it this far if I were the sort of person to say, ‘All right, off you go then.’”

His grandiose declaration was devoid of all logic. I’d reached my hand out to rein him in, but now my arm fell limply in midair.

“My kingdom’s subjects could very well be suffering inside this forest,” Nacht stated. “Knowing that, how could I possibly sit around somewhere safe and wait for somebody else to solve the problem? The very idea is ridiculous. Stick the ‘wiser choice’ up your ass. They don’t call me Prince Grouchy for nothing!”

Nacht pumped up his chest and huffed. His choice of words wasn’t becoming of a prince, but I felt oddly reassured.

“Although,” he added, “the truth is...I *will* just weigh you down. And I fully intend to leave any fighting to you. Think of yourself as a courier for a rather mouthy parcel.”

He still sounds grandiose... But what he's actually saying is so pathetic.

I failed to stifle a laugh. Thanks to Nacht, my mind was more at ease.

Leonhart now turned to me. “What about you, Master Johan?”

The various things I'd been planning to say slipped from my mind. My most extravagant argument would've paled in comparison to Nacht's anyway. I lowered my eyes, heaved a sigh, and muttered, “More or less what he said.”

“Very well,” Leonhart assented. I'd been positive that he would try to dissuade us, but he offered no resistance to our participation.

“What?” I blurted, and the word came out in a silly, stunned voice.

“Let's get going then,” Leonhart said with a smile.

I could feel a vein throbbing on my temple. “You have nothing else to say?!”

“No.”

Of course you do! Shouldn't you be saying “Remember that you're a prince” or “Don't act on emotion”?!

After I'd come this far, it wasn't like I expected him to tell me to turn around and go home...but I had been prepared to suffer a barrage of lectures.

However, Leonhart simply smiled at me. The look in his eyes... It was like he was watching a child who'd grown up. “You two have made your decision, so my focus now is to guard you to the best of my ability.”

“So cool...” Nacht mumbled admiringly.

The modicum of pride I'd held on to prevented me from agreeing with Nacht. I'd be lying if I said that Leonhart possessed no admirable qualities as a man, but the urge to admit that vanished when I watched him because I could imagine my sister blushing at his words.

Paying no mind to the looks that Nacht and I were giving him, Leonhart rifled through a pocket and pulled something out. Two vials made a satisfying clinking

noise as they bumped together in the palm of his large hand.

“Would you mind applying this to your skin before we enter the forest?”

“To our skin?” parroted Nacht, tilting his head as he stared at the vial that Leonhart had given him.

I looked at the one I’d been handed as well, and I saw a viscous liquid sloshing around inside. Removing the cap, I brought the vial to my nose and smelled something citrusy inside.

“It’s oil extracted from a fruit. Well, to be more precise, it’s diluted oil.”

“An essential oil?” asked Nacht. “And why are you giving this to us right now?”

“It’s bug repellent. I can keep you safe from beasts and people, but bugs are a different matter.”

“Makes sense. You impress me. You know everything.”

“You do me too much service,” Leonhart replied. “My knowledge is rather limited to a few specific areas.”

Nacht seemed honestly impressed, but it annoyed me. I didn’t like how knowledgeable Leonhart was, or how charitable he was to share something that was probably quite expensive without letting on how much it was worth, or how humble he was. I couldn’t deny that my inferiority complex was at work, but it annoyed me nonetheless.

Regardless, I poured the liquid onto my hand and applied it to my body in pursed-lipped silence. A lemony scent wafted from the ointment, and the refreshing fragrance brought back memories of my sister, who was so far away from me.

I wonder what she’s doing right now? She’s probably still in Nevel at the moment.

Gazing up at the sky, I pictured my sister’s smile.

I took a step, and my foot sank into the mud. My hand darted out to grab a

tree as I tried to keep my balance. Leonhart looked over his shoulder at me, and I nodded my head to convey that I was fine.

The path was narrow and treacherous, just as Leonhart had said it would be. We were able to march forward thanks to a layer of compacted dead leaves on the ground, but the soil itself was sodden and difficult to walk on. Our way was also frequently obstructed by tree branches and vines since the path was scarcely used and thus ill-maintained. If Leonhart hadn't been walking ahead of us leading the way, we probably would have ended up stuck.

The temperature wasn't as uncomfortably hot as I'd imagined, perhaps because the tree coverage blocked the sunlight, but the air was humid and it clung to my skin. I felt like I was drowning in a warm pond, and even after a deep breath, I still felt suffocated. The occasional buzz of insect wings by my ears added to the irritation. Sweat dripped from my forehead, and I wiped it away before it could roll into my eyes.

Since my arrival in the Kingdom of Vint, I'd journeyed far and wide, and I'd considered myself accustomed to travel. However, thinking that about myself didn't make it so. This trek had revealed that I was still just a kid, ignorant of the ways of the world. I heaved a sigh laden with self-deprecation.

I'm physically fit and I have still ended up like this, so I wonder how Nacht is doing, given that he rarely even leaves his palace.

I glanced over my shoulder and was treated to the sight of Nacht's hair whorl. He was dragging his feet along the ground in silence, his eyes fixed diagonally downward. He hadn't complained about anything out loud, but I could see a vacant expression in his eyes. And, if I wasn't imagining things, he looked pale as well.

"Are you okay, Nacht?" I asked.

He looked at me, and while he didn't open his mouth, the response he would've given was clear in his eyes: *"All right? As if! Take a look at me and tell me what you see, then stop talking to me because I need to reserve my energy to keep moving."*

I gave up after seeing his fierce glare and then turned to face forward once more. I'd been about to offer to take his place in the walking order, but I

ultimately decided against it—my sympathy would only damage his pride. Nacht was usually enthusiastic about making complaints, be it about the heat or the peskiness of some task—but at the moment, he didn't say a word. This was probably because he'd volunteered himself to come along, and he was aware of the responsibility that entailed. He was doing his very best not to be a burden on us, so he didn't need a helping hand.

We continued on without saying anything for a while, until Leonhart, who was the farthest in front, came to a stop. With his hand, he gestured for us to halt.

After Nacht and I had done just that, Leonhart ventured farther on by himself.

Not much time passed before he returned. "The trail merges with the main path here. There don't appear to be any guards."

And just as Leonhart had reported, when we walked farther along, the trail converged with a wide path. There were also no signs of anyone's presence here. Philip must've only stationed lookouts at the mouth of the forest.

Perhaps Philip wasn't as vigilant as he ought to be, or maybe he really wasn't hiding anything, or maybe...he wanted to keep his knights as far away from the forest as possible. The last option seemed the most likely. On the outskirts of the forest, I hadn't even seen any residents of nearby villages. In fact, the area had been eerily deserted. To me, this was proof that *something* was being hidden in the forest.

We traveled farther and farther down the path, and still, there was no one. There weren't even footprints on the muddy ground, meaning that nobody had passed through here over the last few days.

We continued until we reached a slightly open area, and Leonhart stopped, examining the surroundings. "Let's take a break here," he suggested, pointing to a thick branch that had snapped off its tree.

I did as he suggested and sat down on the branch.

However, Nacht shook his head. "If I sit down now, I don't think I'll be able to stand back up."

Leonhart didn't try to force him. "At least have some water," he pressed, passing a canteen to Nacht.

“Thanks,” said Nacht as he leaned his body against a tree trunk. After regaining control of his troubled breathing, he gulped the water down and then let out a deep, relieved sigh. He stood still for about ten seconds, his head turned skyward and his eyes closed, and then he spoke. “All right.” He opened his eyes. “Sir Orsein, I’d like you to tell me something.”

“Of course. I’d be happy to tell you anything I can.”

“Is the land up ahead also prone to landslides? I’m ashamed to say that I’m not well versed in my own country’s geography, but I’d like to hear your opinion.”

“I can’t guarantee that I’m correct, but I don’t find it likely.”

According to Leonhart, we’d already long since left the area most prone to landslides. Once we’d stepped onto the main path, the trail had narrowed and our course had run up against steep slopes, but the ground was mostly level now. Though large roots and old, fallen trees had blocked our way at points, there was nowhere that mud had made impassable.

And if the terrain was the same up ahead, then...

Nacht nodded. “So Philip *was* lying about a landslide blocking access,” he said as if confirming it to himself. From the looks of things, his suspicions had been validated. “The idea that he’s hiding the sick is beginning to look more likely.”

Nacht let out a deep chuckle, but his expression was anything but amused. His brow was deeply furrowed, and his eyes were narrowed and burning with fierce fury. “Isolating the diseased is fine; that’s necessary to prevent the illness from spreading. But he’s closed them off deep inside the forest, and it doesn’t even look like he’s sending them any supplies. What’s the meaning of that? He might as well be telling them to roll over and die. He’s leaving our people to perish as though they were nothing more than dirtied pieces of paper to be torn up and thrown away. Is that how someone with authority should act?!”

Nacht clenched his fist and pummeled it into the tree trunk, seeking a target for his anger. A bird that had been perched higher up flew away, causing a branch to sway.

“Nacht, please control yourself,” I said, trying to calm him down. Although we

seemed to be alone here, it was better not to make too much ruckus.

“Sorry,” he muttered briefly.

No, I’m sorry. I know how dear your people are to you, and I wish I could let you be angry.

“Throwing a childish tantrum won’t resolve the situation,” said Nacht. “*I know* that, but I suppose I still have much growing up to do.” He put on a self-deprecating smile.

However, Leonhart shook his head. “That’s not true. The extent of your anger equates to the depth of your love for your people. You’ll make a great leader one day.”

“I’m not cut out for that.”

Nacht had the ability to get angry for the sake of his people; a sin committed against them was a sin committed against him. I shared Leonhart’s opinion that Nacht’s empathy was a rare and valuable quality. The common people did call him Prince Grouchy, but when they spoke of him, they did so with pride and affection. Nacht loved the citizens of Vint, and they loved him. He’d make a wonderful king... It was a pity he didn’t want the job.

“I’m just a rotten kid who can’t even keep his emotions under control... I’m jealous of you, Sir Orsein. You don’t let anything shake you. You’re always composed, no matter what happens.”

When Nacht glanced at him with a mixture of respect and longing, Leonhart’s almond eyes grew round. He blinked a few times as though in shock.

That was an unusual reaction for him. I’d imagined that Leonhart would casually deflect the compliment and perhaps say “You flatter me” with an amicable air of humility.

Contrary to my expectations, however, Leonhart’s brows drooped slightly, and he smiled wryly. “I’m not the amazing person you think I am, and I don’t deserve to hear you say that. Of course, I do try to remain as calm as I can, but I’m not always successful.”

“Truly?” Nacht asked, stunned.

Leonhart nodded. I wondered whether he was just being humble, but the bitter expression on his face said otherwise.

I couldn't imagine him losing control of himself though. The Leonhart I knew was a mature man, always levelheaded and never out of his depth. *What possible situation could make this man lose his cool?*

The corners of Leonhart's eyes crinkled. "When those dear to you are in peril, everyone gets scared," he said softly.

Come to think of it, he mentioned that he sighed in front of the king. Is that connected to what he's saying?

Nacht seemed a little pleased to discover that Leonhart, the ideal adult, lived in the same world as him, but now *my* head was a mess. Something had stuck out to me. "Those dear to you," he'd said, and those words caused a stir in my heart.

Maybe I'm just surprised to hear him use the word "dear" to describe a particular person. Yes, I'm sure that's it.

I gently shook my head to rid myself of the inexplicable sense of emotional unrest that had filled my heart.

I must've been acting strangely because Leonhart shot me a concerned look. "Master Johan? Is something wrong?"

"Just a bug," I said curtly.

Leonhart didn't press the matter.

"Say, Johan," said Nacht. "I have a question about Philip."

"Yes?"

"Is he Lord Giaster's trueborn son?"

My eyes grew round. "You get straight to the point, don't you?"

"We're in the middle of nowhere," replied Nacht, glancing at the dense thicket around us. "There's no sense in beating around the bush."

"True." I smiled wryly but quickly returned to a more serious expression. "Philip is the child of Lord Heinz and his wife, who passed away at a young age.

However, I've heard that he was born infirm and rarely attended any public functions. In fact, I'd never seen him in person before this visit."

I'd been aware that Lord Heinz had a son, but I'd never once met him. In fact, I'd never heard his name mentioned by Lord Heinz, nor by any of his subordinates. I'd never actually asked Lord Heinz about his son either. Perhaps I'd overthought the matter, but it had seemed that Lord Heinz had intentionally avoided talking about Philip, and I hadn't wanted to ruffle any feathers.

Philip had surprised me at first because he didn't resemble Lord Heinz at all. He'd probably inherited his dainty facial features and slender build from his deceased mother, but even so, I doubted that anyone would realize he was Lord Heinz's son without being told. As such, Nacht's suspicion was understandable.

"I see. That explains why we've never seen them together... Still though, what a thing for Lord Giaster's child to be born frail. It can't have been easy for him growing up." There was a hint of sympathy in Nacht's narrowed eyes.

"I can imagine," I remarked, since I was of the same mind as Nacht.

As befit a flourishing military outpost town, Grenze was packed with soldierly people. In an environment where strength was held in the highest regard, the frontier lord's heir had been born infirm. That was more than enough wind to power the rumor mill. Moreover, Lord Heinz's excellence must've worsened the townsfolk's scrutiny of Philip. It was easy to imagine that Nacht was correct; Philip must've found growing up in those circumstances tough.

"All the same, Nacht—" Had Nacht not raised his hand to stop me, I would've finished: *"That doesn't excuse his actions. Whatever his upbringing was like and whatever reasons he may have, we can't let our judgment be clouded by pity."*

"You don't need to tell me. I do feel sorry for the way he's had to live, but that's all. If he's causing my people to suffer, I won't forgive that." Then, without any hesitation, he declared, "And I'll see that he faces the appropriate consequences." There was a gravity in his tone that was entirely beyond what an adolescent boy should be able to produce. He slowly closed the lids on his hazel eyes, which were devoid of any uncertainty. I felt like I'd caught a glimpse of a kingly personality, of the resolution of those who deserve power.

A tense silence followed, which was ultimately broken when Nacht said, “Well then.” He pushed himself away from the tree he’d been leaning against. “It’s time we get going. If we take too long of a break, I fear roots will sprout from my feet.” Nacht was joking now and being purposefully frivolous.

Leonhart hadn’t said a word for some time, but hearing the playfulness in Nacht’s tone made him grin. I smiled too, then nodded and stood up.

I rotated my ankle a few times. It had only been a short break, but the soreness had gone. Now that we had recuperated slightly, we set off toward the inner depths of the forest.

About an hour after we’d resumed walking, I noticed that an orange tint had infused the light shining through the gaps in the trees—the sun was beginning to set. *This forest is massive, but the village was supposed to be relatively close. I hope we get there before dusk.*

Just as I was thinking that, Leonhart called my name in a hushed voice. I raised my head, and our eyes met. He waved his hand, gesturing for me to hide.

I crouched down and took cover in the shadows behind a tree. Nacht did the same a fraction of a second later.

“There’s a lookout posted in front of the village,” Leonhart whispered to us.

It seemed that we’d reached our destination, but there was a barrier to our entry.

I sighed and looked at Nacht next to me. He scrunched his face up and tutted.

Leonhart was peering toward the village from behind a tree, seemingly deep in thought, but after a moment, it appeared that he’d come to some sort of decision. He looked back at us and whispered, “The lookout has his back turned to us. Let’s get a bit closer.”

Leonhart’s statement shocked me—not his bold suggestion to approach the village, but the astounding fact that the lookout was, in fact, looking the other way.

Seems more like a look-in to me, I thought, but the realization soon struck. *He’s there to stop escapees... He’s not trying to catch reckless intruders from the*

outside like us, but he's there to prevent the diseased people locked up inside the village from running away. That explains it.

It's sickening, I thought with disgust.

We slowly crept toward the village, still crouching. An old wooden fence and a half-ruined stone gate came into view, and standing before them was a single man. I couldn't see his face, but his body was muscular, and he was wearing leather armor. The longsword hanging from his waist was rather plain; clearly, it wasn't meant to be fancy and was designed with more practical purposes in mind.

I tilted my head. Weren't the soldiers from Philip's private retinue outfitted with gaudy metal armor? I remember that distinctly because plate metal armor is an insane thing to wear in this stuffy heat. And another thing... I can only see his back, but I could swear I've seen him before...

"Something's strange, don't you think?" asked Leonhart quietly while observing the lookout.

Now that he says it, I think he's right.

The man was leaning over, resting his weight on the gate.

Is he sleeping on his feet? Or maybe he's been drinking? His ears and neck do look flushed...

"Ah!"

At that point, I stopped moving. That piece of information had formed the basis of a hypothesis in my mind, and the subsequent possibility was horrifying.

Judging by the stern look on Leonhart's face, he'd come to the same conclusion. "Stay here," he said curtly, and he quickly set the items he'd been carrying onto the ground. He unclipped the longsword from his belt and then began walking toward the lookout.

I was enthralled by the way he rapidly approached his target without making even the slightest noise. His every movement was as efficient as could be; it was like I was watching a wild beast on the hunt. In no time at all, Leonhart had crept right behind the lookout, and he unsheathed his longsword. He did not,

however, thrust it into the man's throat. Instead, he replaced the sword into its sheath.

The man who'd been leaning against the gate suddenly toppled, and not because Leonhart had unleashed an attack so quick that our eyes couldn't capture it. Most likely, the horrifying possibility that I'd imagined was correct.

Leonhart caught the man's body before it could hit the ground, and he slung him over his shoulders. After returning to us, Leonhart propped the man's body against a tree trunk. "You two should keep your distance from him," cautioned Leonhart, his voice serious.

The man's face was flushed and his forehead was coated in sweat. He probably had a fever.

"I never thought the lookouts would be sick too," Nacht muttered bitterly.

Unsure of what reply to give, I kept my mouth shut and observed the man's state.

"Hmmm...?" As I gazed at the man, I realized that I recognized his face. *I've seen him before, but where?*

He's not one of Philip's men... His face would be fresher in my mind. No, it's been more than just days since I last saw him. I must have met him...many years ago.

I don't think he had a beard back then. He had shorter, tidier hair as well. The leather armor and the unornamented sword are the same. He used to smile, didn't he? He'd have a carefree smile on his sunburned face, and it reminded me of his...master!

"That's it!" At last, I remembered.

He's one of Lord Heinz's subordinates! So this is where they are...

A Reunion for the Reincarnated Princess

“Aaaaaaaah!!!”

“Please, don’t scream right next to my ear.”

Yeah, like I can help it! I wanted to protest, but when I opened my mouth, all that came out was an unintelligible sequence of noises, screeches, and sobs.

“You want to get to the foot of the mountain as fast as possible, right?” Crow asked casually as he raced down the slope. His movements were effortlessly smooth and surprisingly fast considering that he was carrying me on his back. “Then you’ll have to put up with a few bumps in the ride.”

It had been decided—once the Khuer finished their preparations, they’d descend the mountain with haste, then rendezvous with George and the others. There was just one problem: relocating the athletically-challenged me. If the villagers reduced their walking speed so that I could keep up, the sun would set before we arrived. That said, I was in a position of responsibility, so they couldn’t just leave me behind.

“In that case,” Crow had said, “I’ll carry her.”

Good idea, I’d thought. We’ll cut the time down by a lot if I get carried rather than walk. The idea of my father reading about this in a report is off-putting... But that’s not what’s important right now.

“Please do,” I’d told him.

Crow had smiled and replied, “As you wish.” The look on his face had been rather too delighted, and it certainly hadn’t been the look of a man who’d drawn the short straw and been stuck with an unpleasant task... His behavior had made me a tad nervous.

“I’m gonna diiiiiiie!” I screamed.

“Nah, you’ll be fine. You’re tougher than you look, so it won’t be a big deal if you fall off once or twice.”

Yeah, right!!! We're on a mountain! We're right next to a cliff edge! Falling off means plummeting to my death! Stop smiling like you're having the time of your life and treat me a bit more delicately, please! I am a princess, in case you've forgotten!!!

I would've liked to shout out at least one of my mental complaints, but I couldn't. The gorgeous scenery and my shaking, jittering vision brought tears to my eyes.

"Stop screaming and keep your mouth closed," Crow chided. "We don't want you biting your tongue now, do we?"

I can't choose to stop yelling; it's coming out on its own! Oh, and the screams are letting me vent my fear a little, so let me carry on.

"Or maybe we should slow down? Perhaps you could take a leisurely stroll down the mountain on your own two feet?"

There was still the same carefree, teasing tone in his voice, but somehow, I felt like he was testing me. I wasn't sure why I felt that way, or if I was right, what reason he might have to test me. To be more specific, I didn't have the mental wherewithal to ponder the matter in too much detail.

And so, no thought went into the next thing I said. "Keep it...up. As fast...as you can...please."

But no thought would've been needed anyway. In a choice between my own comfort and the lives of others, the right answer was obvious. I rubbed the tears from my eyes with the back of my hand. After I'd shut my mouth and tightened my grip on Crow, I heard a hearty laugh.

"Got it." As soon as he said that, he sped up even more, and I almost passed out.

Okay, maybe you can hold back a tiiny bit, said a voice in the recesses of my mind, but it was too late to change my decision.

Finally, I reached the village at the foot of the mountain as a lifeless husk of a person.

Waiting for me were four large, canopied freight carriages, two normal-sized

carriages, and...

“Mary!!!”

I whipped around at the sound of my name, and a pair of arms reached out and pulled me into a hug with all their power. My head was immediately buried between a bountiful pair of breasts, and I could smell a lovely fragrance... Something elegant and not too sweet, which suited a charming, mature woman like her.

“I’m so glad you’re okay...” murmured Big Sis Bianca, her voice trembling.

“Bianca...”

She was wrapping her arms around me so tightly that it hurt, and they were shaking too. She’d always acted so dauntless, so I felt choked up seeing her act forlorn like this. *Ohhh, just how much have I troubled her?*

“I’m sorry for worrying you,” I said.

“It’s fine,” she replied with a stoic smile, “as long as you’re all right.”

Ouch... The guilt is immense. She’s probably been concerned about me, and this whole time I’ve been enjoying a cozy retreat in the village.

After a few moments of surrendering myself to Bianca’s embrace, I noticed that Michael and George were standing behind her. Michael was smiling, his brows lowered; George wore a frown, his lips tightly pursed. Was he angry? I considered it, but I didn’t think so.

“I’m sorry for worrying the two of you as well,” I apologized.

George gasped and scrunched his face up, looking like a child about to cry, but a split second later he reverted to a more composed expression. “Not at all. I’m glad you’re okay.”

“And thank you so much for coming through for me despite how unreasonable my request was,” I continued. “I’ve lost count of how many times you’ve been there for me.” I expressed my gratitude to George for arranging carriages for us, and he put on a bitter smile.

“If anything, I wish you’d rely on me more. I want to be of help to you, but the only aid I ever give amounts to little, because you resolve every challenge by

yourself.”

After hearing him speak, I felt agitated. What he’d done for me amounted to more than just a “little.” He’d brought Michael to us when Klaus had been seriously injured, and he’d now come through for us again.

But he didn’t seem the least bit proud of himself. He pointed his gaze behind me, to where a group of thirty-five people, including Wolf, was standing. The hoods of the Khuer’s cloaks obscured their distinctive ash-gray hair and honey-colored eyes from vision. I hadn’t yet explained the details of my traveling companions to George, but he likely knew exactly who they were.

He had come to Flanmer to search for them in my place, and he’d told me to wait for his return...but I’d ignored his request and had set off on my own journey. At the time, it hadn’t been possible for me to sit inside the safety of my palace and wait while other people took responsibility. However, I did regret disrespecting George’s generosity.

I should’ve just sat down and talked to him until he understood my point of view.

“I am a little frustrated that you couldn’t let me handle this.”

“George, I—”

“But at the same time, I think it’s very *you*.”

“Huh...?” My head had begun to sink, but now it shot up and my eyes widened.

Looking at me, George smiled...and not the bitter smile from before—nor his usual, calm smile—but the smile of a child who wanted to say, “*Got you!*”

“You always strive to save others. That’s who you are, Lady Mary.” He said this quietly, as if to himself—his voice sounded happy and a little lonely too. As soon as he’d finished (and without waiting to see my reaction), he started walking. He shot Wolf a glance and called out to him. “Hey, you.”

“Not very polite for a little lord, are you?” Wolf remarked with a hint of exasperation.

George raised one eyebrow in irritation. “I’ll be having plenty of words with

you when this is all over...but not right now. We're going to apportion the supplies and personnel. Come with me."

Wolf slumped his shoulders with the expression of a man who'd stirred up a hornet's nest.

Come to mention it, is the cat out of the bag? Does George know that Wolf was my kidnapper?

"Whatever you say," Wolf replied without much seriousness, and he followed George away.

I hope everything will be all right, I thought, worried, as I watched them leave.

"Hey, Mary," called Bianca.

I turned back to her, and I saw that she was sporting a very grave expression.

"You wanna go along too, don't you?"

It was clear what she was asking about, so I gave one firm nod of my head. I, a princess, was about to place myself in a region potentially suffering from an epidemic. That certainly wasn't a logical decision. I wasn't a doctor, and my knowledge of medicine was full of holes, so there was little I could achieve by going there.

Therefore, the wiser choice would be to sit tight in a safe place to avoid getting in anyone's way. Logically, I understood that... But that choice was impossible for me. It would stop me from being who I was. At long last, I'd realized that I wasn't built to live sensibly.

Bianca's face grew miserable and scrunched up the moment she saw me nod. Her lips parted right away—and perhaps she'd planned to try to dissuade me—but the next moment, she bit on her lips, lowered her brows, smiled, and nodded. "Okay." The awkward smile on her face looked very much like her brother's. "I had a feeling you'd say that, what with you being you." She pulled me into another hug, pressing her forehead into my shoulder. Her slender fingers combed through my hair. "I'll only cause problems, so I can't come with you."

"Okay."

“But don’t overdo it. Remember to ask for help from the people around you instead of powering through on your own.”

Our foreheads bumped together. She was so close... I could see the love in her eyes staring back at me and feel the tenderness of her fingers on my cheeks... It was so very motherly. Even though I knew I was causing her to worry, I felt happy to see that she cared, and a little embarrassed.

“Okay,” I said, wearing a bashful smile.

Looking at me, the corners of Bianca’s eyes crinkled. She ran her thumb across my cheek, and then, as if to change the mood, raised her head. “Before I forget, Michael’s going with you, so be sure to get your money’s worth out of him.”

Following Bianca’s gaze, I swiveled around to face Michael, who flung his head down in a bow.

“I’ll do my best!” he cried.

I inadvertently yelped in surprise. “What?!”

“I might... No, I *will* be helpful to you!” he declared.

“Well, I know that already... What I mean is... Are you sure?” Michael’s presence would be a great boon to us. We could save many more people if we had his healing powers at our disposal. But I couldn’t ask him to put his life at risk to join us.

“Of course,” Michael answered at once, smiling broadly. “Nothing would make me happier than playing a part in saving people’s lives.”

His eyes, gently narrowed, were burning with determination.

Oh, that’s right. He seems mild-tempered, but really, he’s brimming with passion. He’s the sort of person who’d leave the guaranteed safety of a temple to wander the land looking for opportunities to save people.

I’d known that already, but even so, I hadn’t been able to ask him to come with us to face the pandemic. The reason? Because I was weak.

Had I really believed that he should make his own choice, without undue influence, because being around the disease could cost him his life? No, that

was just my way of avoiding facing the problem. In reality, I just hadn't possessed enough guts to take his life into my hands. If I truly wished to save the lives of huge numbers of people, I ought to have been the one bowing *my* head to *him*, asking for *his* assistance.

I felt ashamed of myself for all of that, but all the same, I said, "Thank you. Let's both try our best!"

Michael happily nodded his head.

We will save these people suffering from the disease. And when we're done, we'll all go back home to Nevel together. I didn't say these thoughts out loud, but I made a vow in my mind.

Yeah, I want everything to go my way, and I want a happy ending... So what? I'll make sure everything goes fine and then take everyone home with me... And to accomplish that, I don't care how shameless I might have to act.

I clenched my fists and hardened my resolve.

"Mary, don't worry about waiting for us," Wolf called from a distance, bringing me back to my senses. "Head on inside the carriage as soon as you're ready."

Now isn't the time for lengthy internal monologues, I thought.

"Okay." I turned to Bianca. "I wish I had the time to say farewell properly, but I'd better be going."

"Right you are. I'll be in Nevel waiting for you all to return."

"Okay. A-Also...there's a favor I'd like to ask you...if you don't mind."

"A favor? Ask away. I'll do anything in my power."

"Could I get you to take care of Klaus while I'm gone from Nevel?"

Bianca's eyes widened with surprise.

"I'm sure that George will have made all the arrangements to send him home..." I continued. "But he was so badly hurt, and I'm a little worried about him. I'd like you to stay by his side, if you can."

Klaus's injuries wouldn't have healed overnight. Michael may have closed the

wounds to some extent, but Klaus would still need many more days before he'd be fit enough to move around on his own. If possible, I wanted him to rest up and recuperate before going through the stress of a homeward journey.

However, Klaus's personality meant that there was scant chance of that. So, I wanted to at least get someone to watch over him for the next two weeks and make sure that he focused on recovering without overexerting himself.

"I want you to keep an eye on him so that he doesn't do something silly like come after me. If I could, I'd prefer to have a word with him myself before I go... But there's no time, and it wouldn't be fair to wake him while he's resting either."

"Ummm, Mary?" asked Bianca hesitantly, her face an indescribable picture of awkwardness.

No? Guess not. I suppose it would be hard to keep that stubborn old Klaus from doing what he wants... But I don't have anyone else I can turn to.

I was about to launch into a sales pitch to convince Bianca to agree. However, from the way she was acting, it didn't seem like she was reluctant, but more that she wasn't sure how to respond. After floundering for a while, she finally turned around, guiding my eyes toward a spot.

"Obviously, it was my plan all along to drag him back to Nevel with me... But, well, see for yourself."

I tilted my head, puzzled. It wasn't like Bianca to sound so unconfident.

I wasn't sure what she wanted me to see, but I followed her gaze and spotted a single tree—just an ordinary, unremarkable, tall tree... But someone was hiding behind its trunk.

"Hmm...?" I squinted to get a better look, and then I rubbed my eyes, certain that they were playing tricks on me. But no... I *did* recognize the person there. I recognized him *very* well, in fact, and that familiar face of his hadn't changed one bit. He looked uncharacteristically crestfallen as he stood there.

My mind was flooded with questions. *Why's he here? How's he up and about already? And what's with those sad, puppy-dog eyes, like I've taken away his bone for being naughty?*

The questions were flooding my brain too quickly for it to come up with answers, so instead, my mind gave up and tried to distance itself from the reality of the situation. I found myself inadvertently thinking, *I used to have an IM sticker that looked just like that...*

“Klaus...?” I called.

The man half-hidden behind the tree jumped. Perhaps he was startled that he’d been found; he looked around nervously, his eyes never stopping in one spot for long.

When I took a step forward, his reaction grew more panicked.

After watching his uneasy behavior, I began to doubt whether this really was Klaus. I decided to get closer, partially to see whether I was right, and so I took another step. I walked over to him in the same way that I’d approach a wild animal, bit by bit and with no sudden movements.

However, when I’d made it to within ten meters of him, Klaus bolted like lightning.

“Oops.”

“Forgive meee!” he hollered.

“Stop right there, Klaus!” I ordered as he fled at high speed. This was more of a reflex than anything else, and I hadn’t actually believed that it would work. Nobody would stop running away just because they’d been told to.

Except...he did. He came to a clean stop, like a car whose driver had slammed their foot down on the brakes. This might be strange to say since I was the one who’d stopped him, but honestly, I was surprised.

Klaus also seemed shocked by the fact that he’d stopped.

Conditioned reflexes are no joke...

Klaus stood dead still, fixed to the spot and with his back to me, and I couldn’t find the words to say to him.



I called his name once more. “Klaus.”

“F-Forgive me...” He repeated his apology, his voice agonized, as though those were the only words he knew.

I got the impression that he wasn’t asking forgiveness for running away, but he had nothing else to apologize for. “Forgive you...for what?” I asked out of honest curiosity, but my question seemed to have struck a raw nerve. I realized that my words had made an impact when I saw his hands—they’d been hanging limply, but then they suddenly clenched into fists.

“I’ve let you come into harm’s way multiple times. I was reckless enough to get injured, and that interrupted your plans. I was right beside you and still didn’t notice that you’d been abducted, and I couldn’t even chase after you. I’m... I’m a failure of a guard.”

“A failure of a guard.” I never thought I’d hear those words come out of Klaus’s mouth.

I should’ve immediately replied, *“Of course you’re not,”* but in my shock, I missed my chance.

“I’m too ashamed to be in your presence.” His voice sounded so painfully strangled and despondent.

It made me feel horribly restless. I’d always seen Klaus as someone who seemed docile but was actually stubborn and paid no attention to what other people said, someone whose spirits couldn’t be dampened by sharp or angry words. (In fact, he seemed to enjoy them.) So the person before me right now wasn’t acting like Klaus—this wasn’t like him at all.

But...it was my fault he was acting this way. If I hadn’t gone on my journey, Klaus wouldn’t have gotten hurt. And if I’d put up some resistance or run away when Wolf had abducted me, then Klaus wouldn’t be blaming himself so much. My selfish decisions and thoughtlessness had driven Klaus into a corner... I was the one who should’ve apologized.

“Klaus...I’m—” I called to him.

Still facing down, he flinched. It was like he was frightened to hear me speak,

and I held back the words that I would've continued with.

"I'm sorry," I would've said. "None of this is your fault. I've had you run ragged following my whims."

What do I hope to achieve by saying that? A hackneyed apology from me won't make him feel any less self-reproachful. In fact, it'll just damage his pride.

The only thing apologizing will get rid of is my own guilt.

"Klaus," I called.

"Yes," Klaus replied, his voice little more than a whisper.

It really is so unlike him that it's throwing me off-balance. "I found the tribe of medicine makers that I was looking for."

Klaus said nothing for a second. It was like he was confused. "Yes?" he said, nodding.

"After negotiating with them, they've agreed not just to provide the medicine but also to help out with the treatment."

"You've successfully achieved the best possible result," he said, before adding, "Amazing." He sounded so happy for me.

So I smiled and nodded. "That's right, Klaus. But half of that is your accomplishment."

"What?" Klaus seemed perplexed.

Instead of answering, I stepped over to him. He tensed up nervously as I approached, but I walked past him before coming to a stop. When I turned around to face him, I briefly made eye contact, but he soon cast his head down. I was shorter than he was though, so he couldn't hide his face from me. He was staring at his feet with a terribly sullen look on his face.

I lowered my voice to a hush, like I was letting him in on a secret, and said, "You know... Wolf turned out to be one of the Khuer. He revealed himself to be a doctor because you were injured. And he grew interested in me after he saw that I was trying to save my guard."

Klaus said nothing.

“If you’d chased after us and brought me back, I don’t think I would’ve been able to win the Khuer tribe’s assistance. I might not even have been able to procure their medicine.”

“That’s—”

I was sure that Klaus wanted to say, *“That’s not my accomplishment. That doesn’t change the fact that I was powerless to do anything.”*

And so, I interrupted him. “Klaus.” *Your greatest accomplishment is something else.* “Most of all, if you hadn’t risked your life to protect me, I wouldn’t be here now.”

Klaus’s head shot up. His emerald eyes were opened as wide as they could be.

“Because you protected me, we’ll get the medicine. Because you kept me safe, we’ll get doctors to help us. And we’ll be able to save those people suffering from that disease. None of that would’ve happened if you hadn’t saved me.”

I laid out each of the accomplishments that he’d tried to claim weren’t his.

The pupils of his wide eyes darted back and forth with uncertainty. He’d been gaping before, but now his lips began to quiver and he slammed his mouth tightly shut, as though he was withstanding something. He swayed forward and then crouched down, hugging his knees.

“Klaus, are you all right?” I asked, panicking that he might be feeling unwell.

“I’m fine,” came an inert voice. “Am I...” Klaus hesitated and stopped speaking, and then he furiously ran his hands through his hair. “Am I managing to be useful to you...?” Klaus asked this in a voice so quiet that it was barely audible above the commotion around us.

I hadn’t expected that question. I flicked back through my memories of the past. Every shared memory I had with Klaus was a lively one—a collection of minor incidents. He’d caused me plenty of trouble.

But more than that...

“You’ve helped me so much.” I crouched down as well, in front of him. “Thank you, Klaus.”

I heard a short, sharp intake of breath. Klaus clutched his arms around his trembling knees.

We sat there opposite each other for a while in silence. There was no speaking. I heard the occasional snivel, but I pretended not to notice. And when Klaus finally raised his head and I could see that his eyes had gone puffy, I pretended not to notice that as well.

“Klaus, I’m about to go to Vint.”

“You won’t let me go with you, will you?”

I shook my head. “You’re in no fit state to come with me. Please just focus on getting better.”

Klaus scrunched his face up as if in agony, and then he dropped his eyes to the ground and furrowed his brow. He heaved a heavy sigh. “Please, don’t push yourself too hard.” Klaus stood up and held out his hand to me, helping me to my feet, and then he kneeled in front of me. “I will be in Nevel, waiting for your return.”

I gazed straight into Klaus’s eyes and said, “I will see you again.”

The Viscount's Daughter Has a Hunch

I watched the carriages as they disappeared over the horizon, and then I—Bianca von Diebolt—let out a heavy sigh.

“There she goes,” I muttered.

The man standing next to me curtly replied, “Yeah.”

Aren't you just a joy to talk to? Well, what did I expect? Klaus von Behlmer only gets excited when he's talking to his dear princess. “To tell you the truth, I'm surprised you stayed behind. I was sure you'd stamp your feet and beg her to take you along,” I teased.

He looked at me through squinted eyes.

That gaze was imbued with meaning, and it got on my nerves, so I glared back at him. “What?” I said.

“Nothing.”

“Yeah, right. You're itching to say something—it's written all over your face,” I remarked, pressing him to come clean.

Klaus heaved a sigh. “I was just thinking...didn't *you* want to go with your little brother?”

“I guess I did...” I looked away because I didn't particularly like that he'd correctly surmised my feelings. It seemed to me like he'd seen through my act and had figured out why I was striking up conversation with him: to feel less lonely. “But it's not just Michael,” I continued. “I'm really worried about Mary as well. I wanted to stay with them both if I could.”

I hadn't wanted to spectate in silence as they flung themselves into danger. I'd known that I might not be able to stop them, so I'd wanted to at least stay close so that I could keep them safe... But my mollycoddling would interfere with their actions.

“But that wouldn't have done any good,” I concluded. “I realized...that if I

tagged along, I'd just get in their way."

They wouldn't be able to achieve anything if I stood there telling them, "Don't do this, don't do that." The best way to help children grow up is for their overprotective parents to take a step back.

"You're taking this quite seriously," Klaus said with admiration.

"Shut up," I responded in a disagreeable tone. "This is my dear little brother we're talking about, and Mary, who's like a cute little sister to me. Of course I'm gonna take it seriously... Although, I *am* already beginning to have second thoughts."

I crossed my arms, my gaze still fixed on the horizon. In my head, I knew what was right, but even so, it was hard to pacify my feelings. It took every bit of my self-control not to find and borrow some horse tethered nearby so I could pursue them.

"Chasing after them will ruin things, in more ways than one," Klaus said, exasperated.

I don't need you to tell me that. "You seem quite at ease with everything that's happened," I snapped back spitefully.

Klaus's eyes widened slightly. "Is that how I look to you?" He dropped his gaze to his right hand, which he slowly clenched, then released, and then repeated the sequence once more. "I have to say, it hurts that I can't be by her side. But at the same time, I know that I don't deserve to be there...not as I am now."

His voice was soft. The Klaus I'd known would've infused more emotion into that statement. He would've laid his anger and frustration bare and would have raged. But now, I sensed that he'd come to grips with those immature aspects of his personality in a more collected way.

"I need to get stronger," he declared.

I paused for a moment before responding. "I think you're plenty strong enough already." I certainly didn't consider him weak, not after hearing how hard he'd fought when the pirates had attacked.

But he lowered his eyes and shook his head. "Not at all. For starters, I want to

get to the point where I can overpower ten people at once.”

“For starters?” I asked, perplexed. “I’d love to know what your end goal is.”

With a dead-serious look on his face, Klaus said, “Ideally, I will eventually be able to eradicate a platoon by myself.”

“Like any human could do that!” I instinctively retorted. I just couldn’t let his statement pass without comment. *I’m no military expert, but platoons have like forty or fifty people in them, don’t they? Reckless isn’t strong enough a word to describe someone who thinks they can take out one of those by themselves.* I thought it must’ve been a joke...and an unfunny one at that.

However, Klaus’s face was scrunched up. Clearly, he didn’t see any humor in what he’d said either. “There *are* people who can do that and more...though it grates me,” Klaus muttered glumly. From the stern look in his eyes, it seemed that he was recalling someone in particular.

More than eradicating a platoon single-handedly?! Is that person really human? Part of me wanted to get more details from Klaus, but I decided against it; I didn’t want to put up with his mood if I dug too deep and managed to strike a nerve. “Well, good luck with that, anyway,” I said with a hint of sarcasm.

Klaus nodded. “Thanks,” he responded pensively, not angered at all by my half-hearted encouragement. As I glanced at him from the side, I could see an unfaltering, determined look on his face.

He probably will get stronger too... So that he can protect the person he cares about, and so that, next time, he won’t miss his chance to be there when she’s in peril.

“Okay then,” I said. “I suppose we ought to head back.”

“Let’s. I need to be back in Nevel as soon as I can.” Klaus’s expression was utterly serious despite the misunderstanding.

Has he completely forgotten that he’s injured? “Don’t be stupid. Back to our lodgings. I’ll change your bandages for you when we get in.”

As soon as those words were out of my mouth, Klaus’s face crumpled with displeasure. “*You?* Do you even know how?”

“That’s rude!” I slapped him on the back. The sound it made was nice, but it shouldn’t have hurt much... Or so I thought, but Klaus let out a pained groan. *Too hard? Oh, never mind. It’s his own fault anyway.* “Hmph!” I sniffed, then set off walking in the direction of our lodgings.

The Second Prince's Decision

Leonhart wet a cloth with water from his flask and wiped the lookout's face. As he scrubbed away dirt and sweat, the man's eyelids twitched, then slowly parted to reveal unfocused hazelnut-colored eyes. I wasn't sure whether the lack of focus was because the man was still half-asleep or because he was delirious from his fever. It took ten full seconds for his vacant eyes to become more lively.

The man blinked a few times, and then he became aware of Leonhart in front of him. Immediately, he shot to his feet and jumped back, but he quickly lost his balance and fell to one knee. He let out a low *tut*, apparently frustrated that he couldn't move his body the way he wanted.

"Identify yourself," he croaked, his voice horribly hoarse.

"Marx, try not to move too much."

"How do you know my name...?" He narrowed his eyes suspiciously, but they shot wide open when he pointed them at me. "Ah! Surely not... Prince Johan?"

"That's right. It's been a while."

"Why are... *Argh*."

He'd probably been trying to ask me why I was there, but his question was cut short partway through—he groaned in agony while covering his mouth with a hand and hunching over. Leonhart took hold of Marx to support him and handed him the cloth. Then, he began to rub Marx's back to dampen the pain.

"I-I'm fine... Don't touch me, or you'll catch it." Marx gently pushed Leonhart's hand away.

Hearing what he said, I gasped.

That's right. Physical contact is all that it takes for some diseases to transmit. I don't know the name of the disease Marx has, but Leonhart has been in physical contact with him several times, and the fact that it's not skin-to-skin contact

doesn't guarantee that Leonhart is safe. I knew all of that already, so I was disappointed in myself for losing my composure, even if just for a moment.

However, Leonhart didn't seem the least bit unsettled. "Don't worry." A wry smile appeared on his handsome, manly face. "If this is enough to transmit the disease, then I've already got it. Never mind that—are you able to take a drink of water?"

"Yeah, thanks..."

Leonhart removed the lid from his flask and helped Marx to drink from it. Despite the risk of catching the disease, Leonhart was calm. I wasn't sure whether he was confident that he wouldn't contract the disease or whether he was trying to put the sick man's mind at ease.

After he'd finished drinking some water, Marx let out a long sigh. "Thanks. I needed that."

As though he'd been waiting for Marx to calm down, Nacht began to walk over.

Spotting the shadow on the ground approaching him, Marx raised his head and made eye contact with Nacht.

"Are you from the order of frontier knights?" Nacht asked softly.

"You're...! My word, you're here too," he mumbled, his voice trembling.

Marx looked astonished when he realized the identity of the boy standing in front of him, and his expression finally faded into one of resignation. Marx kneeled before him, though he staggered slightly.

"I apologize for appearing before you in this pitiful state. I'm Marx Gärtner, the vice-captain of the Western Frontier Knights." Marx bowed his head. The calm tone of his voice was reminiscent of a criminal awaiting judgment.

"Marx, you said before, 'You'll catch it.' So it's safe to say that a disease is infesting this village?" Nacht asked his question in a ruthless way, affording Marx no chance to answer falsely.

"That is correct," Marx confirmed unflinchingly.

The truth would've come out sooner or later once we started poking around

the village, but still...Marx isn't holding back. Perhaps he's been hoping all this time that the secret would come to light.

"So the disease that was affecting Grenze didn't die out, and this village is where—"

A shout interrupted Nacht. "The vice-captain's gone!" Somebody had noticed the absence of their lookout, Marx. A crowd of people began to form at the village's entrance.

"Marx! Where are you?!"

The searching voices drew nearer.

What should we do? Hide? But I don't like our chances of silently moving Marx somewhere where we won't be seen. Every second that I spent worrying over our reaction, the voices grew closer.

After pondering for a moment, Leonhart glanced at Marx, and they nodded to each other. Leonhart stood up and said, "He's here!"

The nearest man (probably one of the frontier knights) widened his eyes in shock.

"Who are you?" One of the three men unsheathed his sword, and the other two followed suit.

"Don't," warned Marx.

At that, the men noticed Marx's presence, and the looks on their faces grew even more ferocious. They must've assumed that Marx had been captured.

The youngest of the men shouted at Leonhart. "What have you done to him?!"

"Nothing," replied Leonhart. "Calm down."

"You must've done something. Why else would our vice-captain look like that?" the young man persisted.

Then, he clearly decided that asking questions would get him nowhere because he readied his sword and lunged toward Leonhart.

Leonhart let out a sigh, showing absolutely no sign of panic. He just stood

there, calm and still, not even bothering to raise his weapon. The young man slashed down with his sword while roaring a battle cry, but Leonhart dodged the blow with just a slight change of his upper body position. Stunned that his attack had missed, the man swung his sword several more times, but Leonhart evaded each strike with ease. Then, he grabbed the man's wrist, twisted it, and stole his sword.

"Peter!!!" Another man charged at Leonhart to free his companion.

Leonhart shoved the young man to propel himself out of the slash's path. As the next man's sword slashed through the place where Leonhart had been, Leonhart grabbed his wrist and tugged, throwing the man off-balance, before landing a kick on the man's back, knocking him down.

As Leonhart turned around, he dodged an attack from the last man. He grabbed the back of that man's neck and pulled him down, pinned him on the ground, and twisted his arm up behind his back.

Everything was over in the blink of an eye. Nacht and I could do nothing but stand in silent amazement. *I knew he was strong, but to think that he overpowered them all in an instant...*

"I thought I recognized you..." Propped against the tree trunk, Marx stared up at Leonhart with a mixture of surprise and admiration. "I never would've thought I'd get to meet the Black Lion here in the middle of nowhere." Marx let out a hearty laugh.

"Please don't," Leonhart said, his face bitter.

"The Black Lion... The Nevelian hero?!" The youngest man sprung to his feet. Following this, the other two gawked at Leonhart, suddenly realizing the situation they were in.

Now the center of attention, Leonhart looked uncomfortable. Leonhart's name was famous in the countries around Nevel, and young knights everywhere idolized him, but it seemed that he disliked standing out.

"Why... Why's the Black Lion all the way out here...?" the young man asked, confused.

It was Nacht who answered him. "He's our guard."

“Your guard?” repeated the young knight, failing to recognize Nacht. However, the other two did realize who he was, and their faces grew pale.

“Prince Nacht...”

Hearing that, the young knight at last figured out the identity of the boy in front of him. “What?! H-His Highness...?!” He turned his head back and forth between his companions and Nacht, bewildered. His complexion grew worse and worse as the gravity of the situation began to dawn on him. “Why—”

“You ought to know very well why I’m here.” Nacht shot a cold look at the nervous young knight.

“Well... I...”

“Save it for later,” said Nacht, letting out a brief sigh. “You can take plenty of time to explain yourself then. But first, let us inside.” He took a step toward the village gate.

At once, Marx’s head bolted up. “You can’t!!!” he shouted. Perhaps he’d raised his voice too high and too suddenly because he began coughing into his hand.

“Vice-Captain... You’ve caught it too?” muttered the young knight, watching Leonhart rub Marx’s back.

Marx smiled wryly while his shoulders heaved from his heavy breathing. “Yeah. It’s just how it looks—I’m sick.”

The young knight grimaced and turned his face away, and then Marx turned to look at Nacht. “Prince Nacht, the village is teeming with the sick. I beg you to stay out of there. Please, leave this place.”

Nacht frowned and glared at Marx. “You must know why I’m here. And still, you tell me to turn around and leave?”

The implication behind Nacht’s words was clear: “*Do you expect me to ignore what’s happening after coming this far?*”

Marx slowly shook his head. “I won’t try to excuse the fact that we’ve confined the sick inside this village, and I’ll accept any punishment for that.”

“Marx,” said Nacht.

But Marx ignored him and continued in a matter-of-fact tone. “Take Peter with you if you require a witness. He’s young and fit, so he should be less likely to have caught the disease.”

“Marx!” Nacht cut him off angrily. “You want me to abandon the sick?”

“If that’s how you interpret it, then fine. A person such as yourself shouldn’t be in a place like this.”

“This is my home country,” Nacht snapped. “Be it a busy city street or in the middle of a forest, as long as it’s within our borders, there isn’t a single place here that I ‘shouldn’t be.’”

With that, he set off in the direction of the village once more. The knights’ jaws dropped and they tried to stop him, but he pressed forward regardless. I slipped past the knights, who were running around frantically, unable to manhandle a prince, and I grabbed Nacht by the hand.

After I’d physically brought him to a stop, Nacht glared at me with utter contempt.

“Nacht.”

“So you intend to get in my way as well.”

“Calm down and listen to what I have to say.”

“I’m...!” Nacht began to make an impassioned response, but he quickly shut his mouth. He must’ve realized that he wasn’t behaving with the proper composure. Dropping his gaze to his feet, he let out a long sigh. “Out with it then.”

“Let’s go over what we know. If we’re to believe Marx, then there are a great number of diseased people inside the village. And the number of infected is increasing by the day, spreading to people like Marx who were initially healthy.” I looked over to Marx, and he nodded to confirm what I’d said. “We’re hardly safe right now, but we’ll be in much greater danger if we enter the village. We might catch the disease too.”

“So what? From the moment I decided to go into the forest, I knew that might happen.”

“The fact that people are still getting sick proves that the medicines aren’t working. The ones we’ve brought are unlikely to be more effective.”

In other words, we had no way to help.

Nacht grimaced while listening to my explanation. Deep down, he was probably already aware of everything I’d said, but I decided to say it out loud anyway. Closing our eyes to the facts wouldn’t make them disappear or improve the situation. “Nacht, you don’t have any experience in treating the sick. The only result you’ll achieve by entering the village will be adding a stupidly high-class patient to the list of the diseased.”

“You’re a charmer, aren’t you?” Nacht spat.

“It’s the truth,” I declared. “There is basically nothing that you can do to help here.”

Nacht clenched his fists tightly. “So... So what should I do?! Tell me how I’m supposed to save my people!!!”

“You should turn around and leave. Here, you’re just a boy, and there’s nothing you can do... But out there, you’re a prince, and there are things a prince *can* do.”

“So you’re telling me to look at the bigger picture? You want me to sacrifice the lives of the people right in front of me so that I can save a greater number of people?”

“The villagers here will eventually be sacrificed anyway unless you do something,” I pointed out. “You’re wise, and you know what the correct choice is.”

Nacht bit on his lip and hung his head. His shoulders were quivering ever so slightly.

“Go back to the capital and scrape together as much medicine and as many doctors as you can,” I said. “And if that’s still not enough, you can send a call for aid to Nevel as well. You *must* find a guaranteed way to save the people of Vint.”

“And before I do, how many will die? How many lives must I let slip through

my fingers?!”

“I’ll stem the flow.”

“What?” Nacht’s eyes widened in shock. He looked up at me, flabbergasted.

“Fortunately for us, I *have* studied medicines, and I also have experience with first aid—it’s something I picked up on my travels around the country. I’ll remain here in your place and keep as many people breathing as I can.”

Nacht remained frozen in surprise for several seconds. When he returned to his senses, he appeared panicky, which was unusual for him. “Don’t be stupid! Have you forgotten your place in society?! There’ll be hell to pay if an allied country’s prince comes down with a deadly disease while he’s here to study!”

“My father won’t care whether his profligate son catches a disease or dies.”

My father never expected anything of me anyway. And I can admit that I’ve been able to behave as I like thanks to the fact that my brother, the first in line to the throne, is so capable.

“If I catch the disease, there’ll be nobody to blame but me. It’d be the result of my own actions, and the Kingdom of Vint would bear no responsibility for that outcome.”

“No! If that’s your argument, then I’ll—”

“Nacht,” I said firmly. “How long do you want this argument to go around in circles?”

Nacht scrunched his face up, his expression an almost tearful mix of anger and frustration. I’d never seen him this way before, and the sight left me feeling guilty... But I couldn’t let my feelings get in the way.

“I stay—you go. That’s our best option.”

In a choked voice, Nacht sputtered, “You might die.”

“To avoid that outcome, try not to take too much time getting back to the capital,” I joked with a smile to prevent the mood from darkening too much, but Nacht’s expression worsened instead of improving.

“You’re an idiot,” he muttered, and his voice sounded despondent.

That I am, I wanted to say, mocking myself. What am I volunteering for? I know that I have nothing to gain by impersonating an altruist here. And life is the most valuable thing there is, so I know that nobody would blame me for running as far away from here as I can.

But one simple question had crippled my urge to flee: *what would my sister do?*

She wouldn't abandon the diseased. She wouldn't sit by and watch people die, especially people whom a friend holds dear. I might not be a righteous, virtuous person, but if there's one thing I do not want to do, it's live a life that my sister would disapprove of.

"Leonhart," I called.

"Yes?"

"Go with Nacht."

Leonhart didn't seem startled. He'd probably anticipated my command. However, his expression was extremely severe.

"I can't be there for him, so I want *you* to keep my friend safe instead," I explained. I knew that my choice of phrasing would make it impossible for Leonhart to refuse. Of course, the fact that I'd intentionally worded it that way was indicative of my rotten personality.

The Second Prince's Struggle

After seeing Nacht and Leonhart off, the knights and I decided to help Marx into the village. Two of the knights, one on either side, helped him walk, and I followed behind them carrying the items that Nacht and Leonhart had left to me. Once we passed the stone gate, I could see woodwork buildings with straw-thatched roofs. The knights helped Marx into the nearest house.

Immediately upon entering, my nose registered a strong smell, and I frowned.

I strained my eyes to find the source, which soon leaped out to me: men were sprawled across the floor with only cheap blankets beneath them. Their outfits suggested that they belonged to the frontier knights, and every one of them was red-faced and moaning. It was obvious that they were suffering from symptoms of the disease.

“How appalling...” Not only was there little space, but it was unsanitary too. I felt nauseous after just a whiff—my nose was flooded with the stench of sweat and dust. I immediately walked to the other side of the room and opened a window. Fresh air blew in, replacing the stale air inside the room, and I felt like I’d taken my first proper breath since entering.

“We don’t have enough supplies, we don’t have enough people... We don’t have enough of anything,” complained one of the knights as he laid Marx down.

So they haven’t been sent any resupply missions or additional people to help after all.

“For now,” I said, “I’ll go and draw some water. Where’s your well?”

“I’ll give you a hand,” volunteered a knight.

I set off for the well with him in tow. The village seemed deserted. Only a few people were out walking, and the ones that I did see were dragging themselves along with exhausted looks on their faces. Here and there I heard moaning, which creeped me out.

When we reached the well, I grabbed a bucket with a rope attached to its

handle and threw it inside. While I was hoisting the bucket back up, a woman I'd never met ran up to me.

"Hey, I haven't seen you before. Did you come from outside?!" She tried to get close to me, and the knight hurriedly held her back. Undeterred, she reached toward me with her hand. "Have you got medicine? Did you bring some here? My sweet little boy... He's in pain. Please help!"

After a moment's thought, I answered. "I understand. I'll be there soon."

I passed the rope to the knight and headed back for my belongings. Grabbing the bag containing medicine, I hurried to the woman's house.

A boy of around five or six was lying on a modest bed inside. His face was flushed and he was sprawled almost lifelessly, his thin limbs outstretched. Each shallow, rasping breath sounded like it might be his last.

Before I saw him, I couldn't have imagined how distressing it was to see a child on the verge of death. For a moment, I almost recoiled from my task, but I spurred myself on, crouched down beside the child's bed, and wiped the sweat from his brow with a cloth. When I brushed my finger against his soft cheek, I was shocked by the heat coming off his skin. I soaked a cloth in water, wrung it out, and pressed it against his head to try and cool him.

"Sweetie... Sweetie...!" his mother called from the other side of the bed, and his eyelashes twitched.

His eyelids slowly rose, revealing light-brown, unfocused eyes.

"Huh...?" His half-conscious gaze found me, and the boy blinked with a puzzled look on his face.

"Think you can drink some water for me?" I asked with a smile.

His head bobbed.

I helped him sit up and sip the water, keeping my hand on his back. I wanted to give him medicine as well, but since he was a young child, I would've preferred to wait until his stomach wasn't empty... Unfortunately, his mother told me that he couldn't hold down any food.

So I handed over the medicine anyway and stepped away from the bed,

allowing the mother to sit where I had been. “Give him water frequently so that he doesn’t become dehydrated. Lukewarm water is best, and you should add a pinch of salt to it. If you think that he’s about to vomit, turn him onto his side and rub his back, and take care that the vomit doesn’t get stuck in his throat.”

“Th-Thank you so much!”

Her gratitude made me feel so awful. The medicine I’d given them might possibly alleviate the symptoms, but it’d be wishful thinking to expect a full recovery. However, I decided against disclosing that information at this time. Shattering what little hope they had left could make the difference between his survival and his death.

When I opened the door to return to the knights, I found a crowd outside waiting for me.

“Sorry, but someone said you have medicine!” one person said.

“Let me have some too!” cried another.

“Got any food?!” asked a third.

Arms reached out toward me from the jostling crowd as each person vied to claim me first. Every pair of eyes was bloodshot, and everybody seemed desperate to find a way for themselves and their loved ones to survive another day.

“Please calm down or you’ll wake the child!” I said.

The crowd simmered down slightly. *So they’re not so crazed yet that they feel nothing about disturbing children.*

I finally managed to calm them down, and then I instructed them to reconvene at the building that housed the knights.

I enlisted the help of those knights still able to stand, gave each one some food and water, and instructed them to reach out to every villager. I rushed all over, delivering supplies to bedridden villagers and nursing them. By the time I returned to the knights’ quarters, it was the middle of the night.

I dragged my fatigued body inside and slumped against a wall by the doorway. As I heaved a sigh, a cup was dangled in front of my eyes. Glancing up, I saw

that one of the knights was offering it to me. *Herman, I think his name was.*

“You’ve earned a rest.”

“Thanks,” I said, taking the cup. I blew to cool the liquid, and this disturbed the steam rising from it. It smelled fragrant. I took a sip, and as I felt the hot liquid passing through my gullet, my shoulders relaxed. “Aaaaah.”

“Thanks to you, Prince Johan, everyone seems a little less dreary. I want to thank you.”

Yes, I thought, the villagers did look slightly more cheerful when they got their hands on medicine and food... But that feeling will be temporary. The amount of supplies I’ve brought with me is only enough to delay the inevitable.

“It’s not enough to fundamentally solve the problem,” I muttered bitterly through sips of the weak tea.

Today went fine, but what about tomorrow? Supposing we’re okay tomorrow, what about a week from now? We couldn’t expect help from Grenze to be forthcoming. It was clear that we’d soon exhaust our current stock of medicines and supplies. I had to find a way to persevere until Nacht’s return, but I had no idea how, exactly, to go about that.

“Does Lord Heinz even know what’s happening here?”

My question was met with silence from Herman. He cast his head down.

However, somebody else answered. “Lord Heinz probably hasn’t been told anything.” Marx was the one that’d spoken. *I could’ve sworn he was asleep.*

“Oh, you’re up, Vice-Captain?” said Herman. “Would you like a drink?”

“I would, thanks.” Marx sat upright and took the water offered to him by Herman.

I gave him a chance to have a drink and catch his breath, and then I asked, “What do you mean by that?”

“About a year ago, Lord Heinz started having trouble with his heart. He’s been laid up sick ever since. His son Philip has been governing Grenze as acting lord since then.”

So Lord Heinz's illness wasn't disinformation after all.

I still found it hard to believe that Lord Heinz could be in ill health, but it did explain certain things; if Lord Heinz had been fit and healthy, he never would have permitted the concealment of the sick.

“Lord Philip madly tried to fill Lord Heinz’s shoes, and he put huge amounts of effort into breathing life into Grenze. We tried to give him our support, but he turned around and shooed us away. He never did like us from the start—that is, those of us who worked under Lord Heinz.”

Lord Heinz and the knightly order had forged a strong relationship of trust between them over the years—it was a firm bond that far surpassed even family ties. That truth must’ve appeared so cruel and humiliating to Philip, Lord Heinz’s own son.

“Lord Philip declared that he’d revitalize Grenze into a prosperous town on his own without our help. And that’s exactly what happened. He turned Grenze into a center of trade and nurtured its development. But just as things began to take off, the disease began to spread.”

“And that’s when he decided to conceal its existence?” I asked, my voice icily cold.

Marx smiled bitterly. In the silence that followed, I could hear the crackling noise of a wick burning in an old lamp. “It’s not like he tried to hide the sick from the outset. He assumed it was a normal seasonal fever, so he distributed medicine and urged the townsfolk to be vigilant. But the disease didn’t go away... It continued to spread.”

If news of the outbreak had spread abroad, then fewer people would’ve visited Grenze. Upon realizing that he was facing a greater threat than he ever had before, Philip had hit upon the idea of quarantining the sick from the healthy. With convenient timing, rumors had begun to crop up in the town, and whispers suggested that the residents of a village deep in the forest were the source of the disease.

So, Philip had decided to throw those villagers into the mix of people he planned to conceal. He’d assigned the responsibility of keeping watch over them to Marx and the other members of the Western Frontier Knights. Philip’s

aim must've been to eliminate every nuisance at once.

"I see..." I gulped down the rest of my drink and stared up at the ceiling. The back of my head bumped against the wall. It hurt, but the headache I felt was caused by something else. "Well, now I know that the situation is much worse than I could've imagined."

I thought it was bad enough that help wouldn't be forthcoming, but it's worse... Philip has no qualms about eliminating what he doesn't like.

"This couldn't get any worse," I muttered to myself.

At almost the exact same time, there was a noise from the door—someone was pounding from the outside. The panicked knocking indicated some kind of emergency; the two knights and I looked at each other.

I reached for the doorknob.

Prince Grouchy's Hope

Night had fallen, and I was racing through the forest.

My heart urged me to hurry, and I didn't want to waste a single second, but it was a struggle to keep from tripping over obstacles in the darkness.

Moonlight couldn't penetrate the tree coverage, so the forest was shrouded in pure, inky blackness. Other than the small area around my feet that was illuminated by my torch, it was as though the entire world had disappeared into a void, and that nothingness obscured my way forward. It felt like an omen foretelling the future and caused worry to swell in my heart.

"Argh."

Something sharp grazed my cheek. I reflexively pressed my palm against my face and felt something slimy. When I caught the scent of rusted iron, I realized that it was my blood. I must've sliced myself on a tree branch.

Sir Orsein, who was ahead of me, called out my name with concern in his voice. "Prince Nacht?"

"I'm fine." I wiped the blood from my cheek with the back of my hand and started running again. I'd already put my legs through much more than they were built to handle, and I knew that if I lost my concentration, my knees would give out. The loud noise of my labored breathing was joined by the horribly annoying sound of my pounding heart.

But I had to press on. The lives of my people and my friend were at stake... Even if my legs were to break, I had to keep moving. Driven solely by my willpower, I carried on running and finally made it out of the forest.

The horses were where we'd left them, waiting calmly by the tree we'd lashed them to. After untying the ropes, we mounted up. The young knight Peter was given one of the two horses—I climbed onto the saddle in front of Sir Orsein, as I had on our way in.

The horses galloped away, kicking up clouds of dust in their wake. Sir Orsein's

rein control was masterful, but I could still feel every bump. Add that to the fatigue I'd built up during the day, and I now felt close to passing out. I dug my nails into my palm to keep myself conscious.

When I forced my head up, I spotted a faint glimmer out of the corner of my eye. "Huh...?"

There were flickers of light in the distance. Upon closer inspection, the scattered bright dots appeared to be torch flames. I peered back over my shoulder and pointed at the lights.

"Sir Orsein!"

"I see them." He pulled on the reins and brought the horse to a stop.

Peter had been riding a small distance behind us, and he approached with a puzzled look on his face. "Is something wrong?" he asked, cocking his head.

I turned to face him and pressed my index finger to my lips, gesturing for him to be quiet. It was unlikely that we'd be spotted, considering the distance between us and the group and the fact that we weren't carrying torches. But, regardless, I wanted to be careful.

We hushed our breathing and watched. Judging from the number of torches, there were around ten people.

"They're going in the direction of the forest," whispered Sir Orsein.

He was right. The specks of torchlight were gradually getting farther away from us and appeared to be approaching the path that led into the forest.

"At this time of night?" I asked. It had already been quite some time since the last day had ended, and it was now closer to dawn than midnight. *What could they possibly want to do in the forest right now?*

"Maybe it's the next shift of lookouts?" Peter suggested.

I was hesitant to agree. This group seemed a bit large for just a fresh batch of lookouts. However, I couldn't conclusively deny the possibility.

"What would you like us to do?" asked Sir Orsein.

What should I choose? Should we keep going, or should we go back into the

forest? I wish I had more time to think...

I shook my head to clear it of worry. "Let's keep hurrying onward."

I didn't know what business they had inside the forest, but they probably wouldn't venture in too deeply if they valued their lives. I'd have time to worry and question myself later, but my current top priority was to bring back relief as soon as possible.

Sir Orsein nodded and whipped the horse, which resumed its galloping.

But as we rode away, I turned around once, finding myself drawn to the group. Though the lights drifting away from us were small, they seared into my retinas.

When I turned forward again, I clutched at my chest. *You're being paranoid*, I tried to tell myself, but still, a groundless sense of unease gnawed at my mind. *Why am I so agitated? I think it's more than just the wind pressure that's taking my breath away. What is this feeling? Fear? Nerves? Uneasiness?*

I dreaded that I'd committed a grave error, and that feeling spurred me to action. Before I knew it, I was shouting, "Stop!"

Although Sir Orsein seemed startled by my sudden order, he pulled on the reins. The intelligent horse halted without much fuss.

Peter's horse sped past us, but he managed to turn it around and return before long.

"Is something the matter, Prince Nacht?" asked Sir Orsein.

I was unable to reply immediately. At this late stage, I still couldn't completely make my mind up. *Am I really making the right choice? This could turn into me just wasting valuable time.*

But...I couldn't ignore the anxious rumblings of my heart. "Sorry, but I've changed my mind. I *do* want to go back to the forest."

"Do you want us to follow the group we saw earlier?"

"Please do," I replied. "I have a bad feeling about them."

Sir Orsein's face tensed up. He informed the confused Peter that we'd be

returning, then swiveled the horse around. We raced back across the path we'd come down.

Hurry, I prayed, hurry!

We were moving so quickly that it hurt to face forward against the wind, and yet the scenery passed us by so aggravatingly slowly. My heart thumped in my chest, making an ominous noise.

Finally, after what could've been at once an instant and many hours, the forest came into view. Positioned outside the entrance to the forest were a multitude of lit torches.

It must be the next shift of lookouts after all. Maybe I was overthinking it...

Sir Orsein slowed the horse down.

I felt my entire body relax at once, and I let out a deep sigh. Although it wasn't ideal that I'd wasted time by coming back, I was more relieved to know that my fears had been baseless. Looking over my shoulder, I made eye contact with Sir Orsein. I was about to apologize to him and Peter and then reembark toward the capital...but a moment before I could open my mouth, a strong gale blew over us.

"What...?!" My eyes shot wide open after I caught a whiff of the scent carried by the wind.

Sir Orsein must've noticed it too. An intense look rose to his face and he fixed his eyes on the forest.

It was the unpleasant, pungent smell of oil. The meager amounts of oil needed to light their torches wouldn't be enough to create such a powerful stench... No, they must've dumped entire barrels.

"Sir Orsein!" I cried, but a fraction of a second before the words left my mouth, the horse began to charge forward at such an intense speed that I realized Sir Orsein had previously been taking an easier pace for my sake. At once, I flung my arms around the horse's neck while keeping my eyes fixed on the group of people.

As the scattered balls of torchlight grew closer, I managed to make out the

blurry faces of startled people turning around. Instead of maneuvering around them, we charged straight through the center of the group, deftly avoiding hitting anyone.

I scrunched up my face after smelling the noxious fumes. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the last remnants of oil dripping from the rims of empty barrels that were scattered on their sides all over the area. I bit down on my lip. They'd obviously been used to douse the forest trees in oil, and the very thought made me nauseous.

We wheeled around, putting the forest to our back and positioning the people in front of us.

I reined in my furious emotions and asked, "What are you doing?" I'd tried to sound calm, but my voice had come out awfully hoarse.

Starting at one end of the group, I ran my eyes across the faces of the people. They all had muscular physiques, and most of them were strangers to me. However, mixed in were a couple of faces that I'd seen around before. And in the center...a slender person whose face was hidden by a hood. This person was surrounded by men who had been made cautious by our sudden arrival and were now reaching for their swords or bows. The only visual information that I could glean from the central hooded person's appearance was that they were slender. I couldn't even distinguish whether they were a man or a woman. But I was certain I knew who it was.

"I have asked you to tell me what you're doing, *Philip*."

The figure didn't appear panicked. He just stood there, silent. After a little while, he sighed. He pinched the hood of his cloak and pulled it, dropping it over his back and revealing his dainty face, which looked nothing at all like his father's. The torchlight illuminated his sickly, pale skin.

"I feel like I should be the one asking you what *you're* doing in a place like this, Your Highness," replied Philip, his voice as calm as though we'd bumped into each other in the garden of his mansion. He smiled his usual faint smile, completely devoid of distress or fear.

I'd thought of him as just an ordinary man, but nothing could've been farther from the truth. The very fact that he could act so normal in this situation was

unusual. Compared to him, even the men around him who were scowling at us menacingly seemed more decent.

“You told me that you were returning to the capital,” he continued, “so it didn’t occur to me that we might run into each other out here.”

“I wish we hadn’t.” I climbed down from the horse while glaring at Philip.

Sir Orsein got down as well and took up a protective position by my side.

I stared Philip straight in the eyes. “I’ll ask you one more time—what were you about to do?”

Philip didn’t look away, but nor did he answer me. Instead, he raised his left hand, then swung it down, giving a signal.

Seeing the sign, one of the men behind Philip drew an arrow from a quiver strapped to his back. This wasn’t an ordinary arrow; it had a rag wrapped around its tip. He brought the arrow to a torch that was carried by another man. The rag, which must’ve been soaked in oil, rapidly burst into flames.

A chill ran down my spine as I watched the dazzling blaze. Realizing what was about to happen, I shouted, “Stop!”

But the man paid no attention to me. He nocked the fire arrow.

I tried to run toward him, but before my eyes, the arrow took flight. When I tried to scream, no sound came out. My fingers grasped fruitlessly for the arrow as it whizzed in a straight line toward the forest.

It...was out of my reach.

My eyes followed every point of the flying arrow’s trajectory clearly as it left behind a tail of fire like a comet. In my imagination, I could see the oil-doused trees bursting into flames.

Please, stop this!

But just as despair threatened to black out my vision, I felt a sudden gust of wind.

No... It wasn’t wind... Someone had moved so quickly that I’d just thought it was.

A blade moved with lightning speed, so fast that all I could register was the dull, dark-gray glint of steel, and then I heard the sound of something being crushed. A foot trampled the arrow, now sliced into two, and stomped it into the ground. The quiet snapping noise was somewhat underwhelming.

Everyone fell silent. When somebody gasped, it sounded much louder to me than it actually was.

The tail of our savior's cloak flapped, a second delayed from his movements. From beneath his black hair, his dark, almond eyes flicked back up bewitchingly, and I could see the torch flames reflected inside them.

"Prince Nacht," he called.

Hearing my name, I took a breath, feeling at last like the spell that'd bound me had been lifted.

Without taking his piercing eyes off the men, Sir Orsein asked me, "What would you like me to do?" His charming voice was low and firm with mellow undertones, but it sounded to me like a predator's growl.

I felt as though I held in my hands a set of chains binding a fierce beast. He'd asked what I wanted him to do, but it seemed more like he was demanding me to order him.

"Put them out of action."

The moment the words left my tongue, Sir Orsein narrowed his gaze. The fire raging in his eyes burned far more fiercely than mere torchlight. Seeing that, I finally realized...

He's angry.

"As you wish," Sir Orsein said.

After a quick slash of his sword, he crouched down and bolted. There was no gradual increase in his pace; he was moving at full speed from the moment he began to run. His beast-like swiftness was too much for my eyes to follow—he shot past Philip and jumped down in front of the man who'd fired the arrow.

The archer stood there in stunned incomprehension as Sir Orsein's sword sliced into his hand and the bow it carried, cutting through the bowstring. A

fountain of red spurted out. The man dropped the bow and screamed while clutching his blood-soaked dominant hand.

Before the man beside him could draw his sword, Sir Orsein struck him with his scabbard. I heard a bone snap, and that man collapsed where he stood.

“Aaaaaaah!!!” A different man roared a bloodcurdling scream and swung his sword down toward Sir Orsein from behind.

But Sir Orsein looked back over his shoulder at once, used the bracer on his hand to parry the blow, and then landed a powerful kick to his opponent’s belly. Knocked back, the attacker collided with another man behind him and they both fell to the ground.

Sir Orsein deftly dodged a sidelong swipe from one man and clashed swords with another. The steel blades scraped together, producing a horrible screech. While using the cross guard of his sword to fend off his opponent’s blade, Sir Orsein hooked the man’s foot out from under him and swept it into the air. The attacker made a poor attempt to stay upright and failed. Sir Orsein stomped down on his stomach with all of his might, and the downed man spewed spit and bile from his mouth, his eyes rolling into the back of his head.

“Die!” screamed another man as he launched a throwing knife, but Sir Orsein swiped it out of the air with his sword. He then instantly leaped backward to avoid another incoming blade that’d been swung down toward him by his next foe.

Sir Orsein soon regained his stance, picked up the fallen knife where it’d landed, and threw it back toward the swordsman who’d come for him. The flying blade cut through the cloud of dust, tracing a well-aimed path, and plunged itself deep inside the man’s shoulder.

Sir Orsein dodged another stabbing blow from his rear and thrust his sword between himself and his new assailant. He swiveled his body around and clashed swords once, twice, thrice with the attacker, and then he realigned his own sword and slid it along the attacker’s blade. Sir Orsein’s sword struck the cross guard of the assailant’s weapon and ripped it from his grasp, sending the blade flying away. Then, he gouged through the other attacker’s side. Thanks to the foe’s armor, the wound wouldn’t be fatal, but even so, the man fell to his

knees and dropped his sword.

Now, only one knight remained, pale-faced and shaking in his boots.

Sir Orsein slowly and leisurely walked over to him. He pulled the sword from the man's jittering fingers, flung it away, then struck him on the neck with a hand chop. The man's large body swayed and then he collapsed onto the ground.

I was rendered speechless. The fight had ended in such an underwhelming, one-sided way.

Sir Orsein sheathed his sword after a quick flick to rid it of blood. When he turned back around to face me, I could no longer see the same fierce light in his eyes. "Apologies for taking so long," he offered respectfully.

What reply could I possibly have given? It hadn't taken long at all—fewer than ten seconds had passed by my reckoning. What I'd just experienced had given me a brief glimpse into the reason why he was called the Black Lion... He fought like a wild beast. Every move was efficient, every lunge vigorous. Perhaps this isn't the best word to describe it, but his combat seemed...*beautiful*.

Philip, now alone, glanced around at the men strewn across the ground and then heaved a sigh. "Quite the strong guard you have there. I don't recall him being present for the inspection. I wonder...where exactly did you get your hands on him? Oh dear, dear, dear. Nothing seems to be going my way."

"That's right, I won't *let* you have your way. Don't prolong this, Philip. Surrender."

Philip raised his arms in a half-hearted gesture of capitulation and, with a knowing tone of voice, asked, "Are you sure that's really for the best?"

"What are you talking about?"

"There's no effective cure for the disease that broke out in Grenze. Even the Giaster family's residential herbalists are at a loss. If I'd left the sick inside the town, the disease would have spread by now to every corner of Grenze."

Although it pained me to agree with him, Philip was right. No effective medicine had yet been found, and perhaps none even existed anywhere in this

country.

“If we don’t keep the disease at bay here,” he continued, “it will ravage the entire country. No, it won’t stop at the borders... It will spread throughout the whole world.”

“That may be true,” I sneered, “but it doesn’t excuse you trying to burn down a forest with innocent people inside.”

“No, I suppose not. However, Your Highness, you are soon to find yourself guilty... Guilty of unleashing a lethal disease upon every part of this world just to prolong a few dozen lives. Answer me this: are you sure you’ll be able to live with that grave sin?”

The gravity of the choice thrust upon me took my breath away. On one side of the scales sat the lives of a few dozen people, and on the other rested the safety of the entire world.

I just want to save the lives of those people waiting in that village. Is that so much to ask for? But...will my actions endanger the lives of other, blameless people? To choose one is to abandon the other. What will be left for me after I make up my mind and commit to such a sinful decision?

Is it the role of a statesman to make such a choice? Is that the essential duty of those with power? It’s not for me... I never wanted to become that...

It felt like I was suffocating, like my heart was being ripped apart, like I was clutching the things I cherished in my hands... But everything was slipping through my fingers, and soon, I’d have nothing left.

Someone... Anyone... Please. I’m begging you. I’ll give you anything you want, anything I can... My people mean so much to me... They’re my treasure... Please, save them.

“Prince Nacht!” Sir Orsein grabbed my shoulders and shook me.

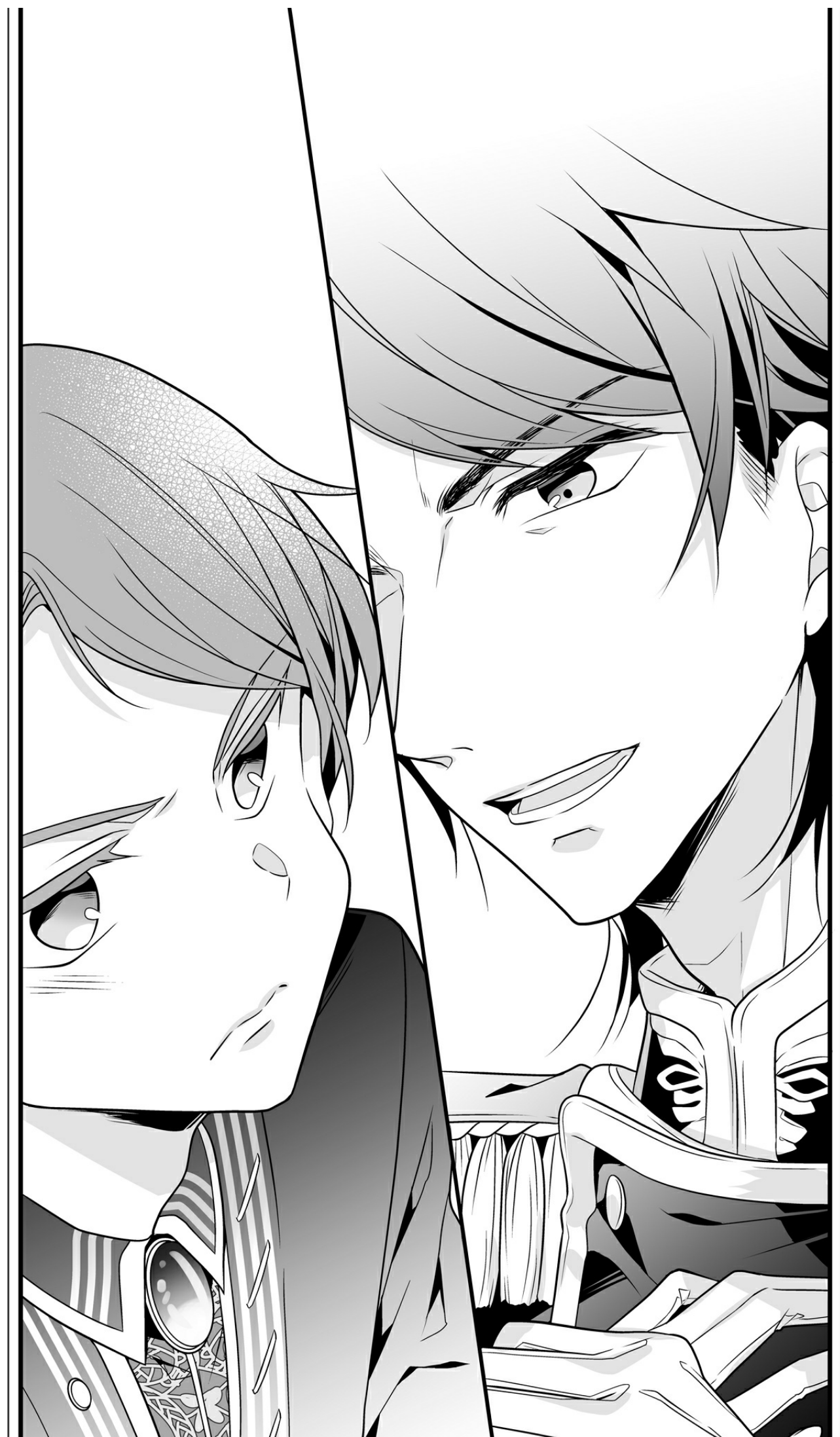
“S-Sir Orsein?”

His eyes pierced me with a look so severe that it frightened me. “Don’t listen to him. There’s still hope.”

“Where?!” I cried. “I can’t see any... There *is* no hope!” I tried to swipe his

arms away, but he caught my hand.

Sir Orsein stared right into my eyes and spoke with a firm tone of voice. “No, there *is* hope. You can’t tell right now, but it *does* exist. Nevel’s—no, *my*—beacon of hope is out there, and it will never fade.”



Your “beacon of hope”? What does that mean? I would’ve asked if I hadn’t heard the flapping of a bird’s wings in the sky above.

I raised my eyes to the heavens and saw a single black bird circling above us. Only then did I realize that the sky had begun to brighten. Rays of light shone from below the eastern horizon, and I squinted as I gazed at them.

Then, my ears picked up the clatter of wheels.

I’m hearing things, I thought at first. But then, I spied small shapes in the distance, and they were growing larger. Several carriages were coming toward us. And not all of them were ordinary carriages; among them was a large vehicle for carrying freight. The sight was proof that the noisy racket of wheels was no trick of my ears.

Why are carriages turning up here? I watched the scene unfurl in dumbstruck silence, and then, one of the carriages came to a halt in front of me.

A figure in a black hooded cloak, probably a young man, sat at the carriage’s reins. He slunk off the seat and opened the carriage door.

“Still breathing, Princess?” asked the young man in a remarkably casual manner.

“Oh, thank you very much for asking!” griped a girl’s voice from within. “If you’re that concerned, then a little warning before you swerve would be nice! Why did you do that?!” Her voice sounded sweet, ill-suited to a remote place like this.

“Because we had a change of destination. And now we’re here, so it’s time to get outta the carriage.” The young cloaked man held out his hand, and another, smaller hand reached out from inside the carriage. A young girl emerged.

The dawn breeze swept through her wavy, platinum-blond hair, which sparkled in the morning light. The eyes on her gorgeous face grew wide when she saw us—they were large and round, as clear as the dawn sky and as vibrant as the sea on a sunny day. A rouge tint quickly appeared on her alabaster cheeks. It was like I was witnessing the moment that an elaborate doll came to life.

“Wha...?! S-Sir Leon?!”

“Princess...!” Sir Orsein ran over to the girl, his face a mixture of surprise and joy.

The girl let go of the young man’s hand and ran to Sir Orsein. “S-S-Sir Leon, why are you...?” the girl began to ask, confused. It was the obvious question. But she quickly shook her head as though to clear the question from her mind and then put on a more serious expression. “No, I have higher priorities right now. Sir Leon, have I made it in time?”

Sir Orsein gasped, his eyes twinkling. “Does that mean...?” he asked, barely managing to keep his soaring emotions out of his voice.

The girl gave a firm nod. “Yes. I’ve come to deliver the medicine.”

An unintelligible sound escaped my throat the moment I heard that word.

Medicine.

Did she just say that? My brain couldn’t keep up, and my cynical inner self scrambled to snuff out the newly lit flame of hope. As if it could be so easy... Life just doesn’t work out that nicely... It would have to be a miracle.

My body’s reaction, however, was more honest; my hands began to shake.

“Did you...” I began, my voice trembling. “Did you just say that you’ve brought medicine?”

The girl turned to me and tilted her head, puzzled, but a moment later her expression grew serious, as though she’d realized something. “By any chance, has someone dear to you caught the disease?”

“Yes... People very, very dear to me,” I said, weighing each word with care. In my mind flashed the face of my friend, the faces of my people...the ones I’d left behind.

She took my hand and stared straight at me with her jewellike eyes. “It’s going to be all right. I have more than just medicine. Excellent doctors have come to help too. Those people you hold dear... We’ll save them, no matter what.”

“It’s going to be all right.”

“We’ll save them, no matter what.”

It was difficult to express how much I’d wanted to hear those words, how much I’d yearned for them.

“Th...Thank you!” I said, forcing my trembling voice out. A warm droplet trickled down my cheek.

The girl seemed flustered by my reaction, but my tears didn’t stop flowing. A beacon of hope had appeared all of a sudden...in the shape of an adorable young girl.

The Second Prince's Hope

Our late-night visitor turned out to be a short boy. I could tell that he was one of the village's original residents because of his distinctive, dark skin.

He grabbed my hand, on the verge of tears. "Come with me! Please! It's my father!"

I gasped. Rushing back into the room, I fetched my bag.

"I'll come too, Prince Johan!" said Herman, rising to his feet to accompany me.

"No, you stay here and watch over the knights."

I darted out of the house. The boy led me by the hand as we both ran.

Soon after we'd left the house, I noticed that something was strange: the village had been empty and eerily silent while the sun had been up, but now that night had fallen, I could hear people's voices from the village center. It sounded like they were arguing. I squinted my eyes to see better in the darkness, and I could see the backs of people in front of an area lit by a brazier.

"Plague-bringer!!!"

I could hear shouts coming from the other side of the crowd.

Of all the times to quarrel, do they really have to do it now, when the situation's so dire? I almost sighed, but I managed to hold it in. *Actually, I suppose it's because things are so dire. The boy's father comes first, I decided. I'll pacify these people when I'm done with that.*

I resumed running to the boy's house. However, the boy was leading me toward where the argument was happening, not away from it.

"We should go another way—"

"Hurry! He's gonna get killed!"

"What?!" The boy's words stunned me.

Did he say “He’s gonna get killed”? Not “He’s gonna die”? In other words, somebody is attempting to harm this boy’s father? And he’s heading into the middle of the disturbance...

When I pieced those two bits of information together, there was only one conclusion to be drawn. “Stay here,” I commanded.

I released the boy’s hand and jostled my way through the crowd. In the middle, I found two men. One was a young man in his midtwenties who appeared rather hotheaded. The other was a dark-skinned man who was probably in his late thirties. Presumably, the second man was the boy’s father.

The young man had grabbed the older man by the shirt and was glaring at him. “Fork over the medicine and food they gave you right now! You do that, and I’ll consider us even.”

“It’s my wife’s share...” the older man replied. “I can’t give it away.”

The contents of their conversation made me want to tut to myself. *I didn’t think arguments would spring up this quickly over the supplies I distributed. This village must be in a more desperate situation than I’d even imagined.*

“Some nerve you have! Brave of you to say that, when none of this would’ve happened if you’d stayed inside your forest. You’re the reason my mother’s in pain, why I’m stuck here... Your village is to blame for everything!”

“No! It’s not our fault!” The boy’s father swiped the man’s hands away.

“Don’t lie to me! There was no disease before you lot started coming to the town!”

“If we’re pointing fingers, then the root cause is that your people started chopping down the trees in our forest!” countered the older man. “We didn’t *want* to have to go to your town! But you all started destroying the forest and took our normal livelihoods away.”

“Oh, so it’s our fault, is it?!”

“Stop this!” I shouted. I barged my way between the two of them before they could begin grappling with one another again. “Relax,” I said, keeping my own voice as level as I could so as not to provoke them. “Both of you need to calm

down.”

Unfortunately, my intervention had little effect. The younger one madly tried to shove me aside and get his hands on the older one. “What’s it to you?! Outta my way!”

“I’m staying right here,” I replied. “Pinning the blame on this man won’t do anything to improve the situation.”

“No? Then what will?!” screamed the young man, as though looking to vent his frustration. “Everyone who came down with the disease has been carted off deep inside the forest and locked away in this village, family and all. Even our own country has abandoned us! It’s *their* fault that we’re going through all of this.”

Voices from among the crowd rose up in agreement with the young man.

“H-He’s right,” one person chimed in. “These villagers are to blame.”

“If it weren’t for them...” muttered another.

The dissenters shot murderous looks at the dark-skinned man, and everyone seemed thirsty for blood.

Uh-oh, I thought. The sick residents of Grenze who’d been confined to this village were beginning to take out their anger, fear, and worry on the village’s original inhabitants. Nothing could be as troublesome as the mob mentality that emerged in repressive situations.

“Get lost,” someone snapped, and at the same time, a rock fell to the ground.

That triggered something in the crowd. Soon, another rock fell, but this one had clearly been intentional—someone had thrown it. Animosity swelled within the crowd.

“Get out of our sight!”

A small stone struck the dark-skinned man on the arm, and he groaned. I stepped in front of him to block the path of any more missiles.

But then, I felt something strike my head. “*Oof*.” A rock must’ve hit me above my left eye. I felt the throbbing pain first, and then the trickling of a warm liquid flowing around my eye and down my cheek. The dripping blood prevented me

from opening my left eye.

From right to left, I ran my remaining eye across each of the faces in the crowd, across everyone who had picked up stones. Perhaps they'd frightened themselves by drawing blood from me, as their fervor appeared to have waned, and the malicious looks had vanished from their faces. They just stood there limply, pale and aghast.

"Please calm down," I said once more.

They were more receptive to my message this time. Slowly, as though I were speaking to children, I declared, "The country hasn't abandoned you."

This drew frantic whispers from the crowd. They must've been torn between the desire to believe and the suspicion that if they did, they'd be let down.

"The second prince, Nacht von Ersta, is going to every length to save you all," I explained.

"Prince Nacht...?" repeated one person.

"Like we'd believe that!" shouted someone. "Royals couldn't care less about what happens in border towns like ours."

"Hold on, this is Prince Grouchy we're talking about," argued another. "He's unusual for a prince. He'll even talk to commoners like us."

Apparently, Nacht's name was potent enough to give them pause for thought. They sounded proud of him, as if he were their own family.

"Nacht came as far as the village gate with me," I explained. "The food and medicine we've provided for you were the result of his arrangements. In fact, *he* wanted to be the one to give them to you, but it would've been meaningless for him to come inside and care for you personally; the fundamental problem would still remain. Nacht left to return to the capital precisely because he knew that to be the case...and so that he could bring back more medicine and more doctors."

Each person looked at me with bewilderment.

"What are you tryin' to—"

One of the knights pushed his way through the crowd and appeared before

us. He must've heard the commotion. Seeing my bloodied face, he hurriedly ran over to me. "Whoa, Prince Johan?! Why are you bleeding?!"

"'Prince Johan'? Isn't that...the name of the prince from our neighboring kingdom?!"

"Now that you mention it, I know I've seen him with Lord Heinz before... Oh no... What have we done...?"

It seemed that the crowd had figured out who I was. They'd now turned so pale that I had to pity them, and they seemed like they were all in great mental turmoil.

"The fact that I, Johan von Velfalt, am here is proof of what I've told you." I wiped the flowing blood away with the back of my hand, then forced my left eye open and looked straight at the crowd. "I repeat: your country has not abandoned you. Nacht loves the subjects of Vint with all his heart, and he's doing his utmost to save you."

Nobody said anything, but the murderous atmosphere had dissipated for good.

"So please, I want you all to behave in a way that's deserving of the pride he feels for you."

I heard a gasp. They were all biting their lips and staring at their feet, and I could see shame and remorse on their faces.

If they're capable of feeling ashamed of and repenting for their actions, then everything's fine—it's not too late. People are weak. But because we're weak, we understand the pain of others.

"It's not easy watching your family suffer. Maybe you lie awake all night, worried and upset. But please, believe in Nacht, and give him just a little more time. I want you to wait here, with me, for his return." At the end, I added, "Please."

"Okay," mumbled someone.

Slowly, I swept my eyes across them all. They were each nodding their heads, tears almost streaming from their eyes, and I could no longer see despair or

hatred on their faces. I turned around to look at the dark-skinned man behind me. He also nodded, wearing an awkward smile.

Thank goodness. The people my friend wanted to protect... For a moment, I almost lost them all in the worst way possible.

The instant that relief took over my mind, I felt my body go limp, and my vision grew blurry.

“Prince Johan?!”

I started to fall, but the knight beside me caught my body. Though I tried to stay conscious, the shuddering waves of fatigue and drowsiness were difficult to resist. Remembering that I had one last thing to say, I clung desperately to consciousness. “Before I forget... About this injury... Tell people that I...tripped on a tree root. Thanks.”

“Wait, Prince Johan!!! Hang in there!”

Having said all that I had to, I loosened my grip on the waking world. The last sight I saw was the tortured face of the knight.

I could feel the light shining through my closed eyelids, and I heard leaves rustling and birds chirping. I’d hoped to have a quick nap to rest up, but it seemed that I’d lost consciousness for quite some time.

I need to get up... There’s so much to do, I thought, but I couldn’t quite force myself to rise. Moving my limbs felt like lifting lead weights, and I was suffering from a blinding headache. It throbbed and pulsated noisily...like I had a second heart behind my ears. I grimaced because of the debilitating migraine but braced myself against the pain.

Then, I felt a soft sensation. “Hmmm?” Something had been placed over my eyelids. The sensation was warm and soft... Probably someone’s hand. A nice heat warmed my eyelids. Strangely, the pain began to dissipate. The feeling was so pleasant that I almost dozed off again.

No, I thought. *You’ve got heaps of work to do.*

However, I was powerless to resist the onset of sleep. Perhaps the person

next to me noticed that I was drifting off again, or perhaps not. They lifted their soft hand from my eyes. I didn't want that sensation to go away, so I instinctively clutched at the hand.

That startled someone in the room.

"Johan, you were awake...?" asked a pleasingly high-pitched voice.

I heaved my eyelids up, and what I saw was an angel. Her platinum-blond hair glimmered faintly, and her eyes were a clear, deep blue. Even the most renowned of artists would fail to capture her full beauty with their brush, and even the most exceptional of sculptural prodigies couldn't sculpt her likeness faithfully.



Ah, right... This is a dream. There's no way my sister could be here. I concluded that I was having a sweet dream.

"Thank goodness," she said. "You remember me."

Not a day has gone by that I haven't thought of you. I yearn for you so badly that you show up in my dreams, like this. Although...I'm a bit surprised that my imagination has been working hard enough to clearly depict how you've grown up since we last met. I've always been a bit slow when it comes to artistry, but it looks like I do have some innate creative talent...when it comes to my sister.

"I have so much I want to talk about, but stay in bed for a little bit longer or you'll aggravate your injury."

"But I need to—"

I tried to sit up, but she stopped me. She pulled her hand away from mine and stroked my hair, gently and tenderly. "You don't need to anymore. Everything's all right."

"Huh?" I blurted. My voice sounded silly.

My sister smiled and repeated herself once more. "Everything's all right. Some excellent doctors have come, and they've brought an effective medicine."

Well, don't my dreams just have an exceptionally rosy outlook... I thought, feeling like I wanted to laugh at myself. And yet, I felt my breath stick in my throat. My heart ached. Tears welled up of their own accord, blurring my vision. As though to hide them, my sister's soft hand covered my eyes once more.

"You've done so well, Johan. I'm proud to be your sister."

I couldn't hold back my tears any longer, and they streamed down my face. I started to sob.

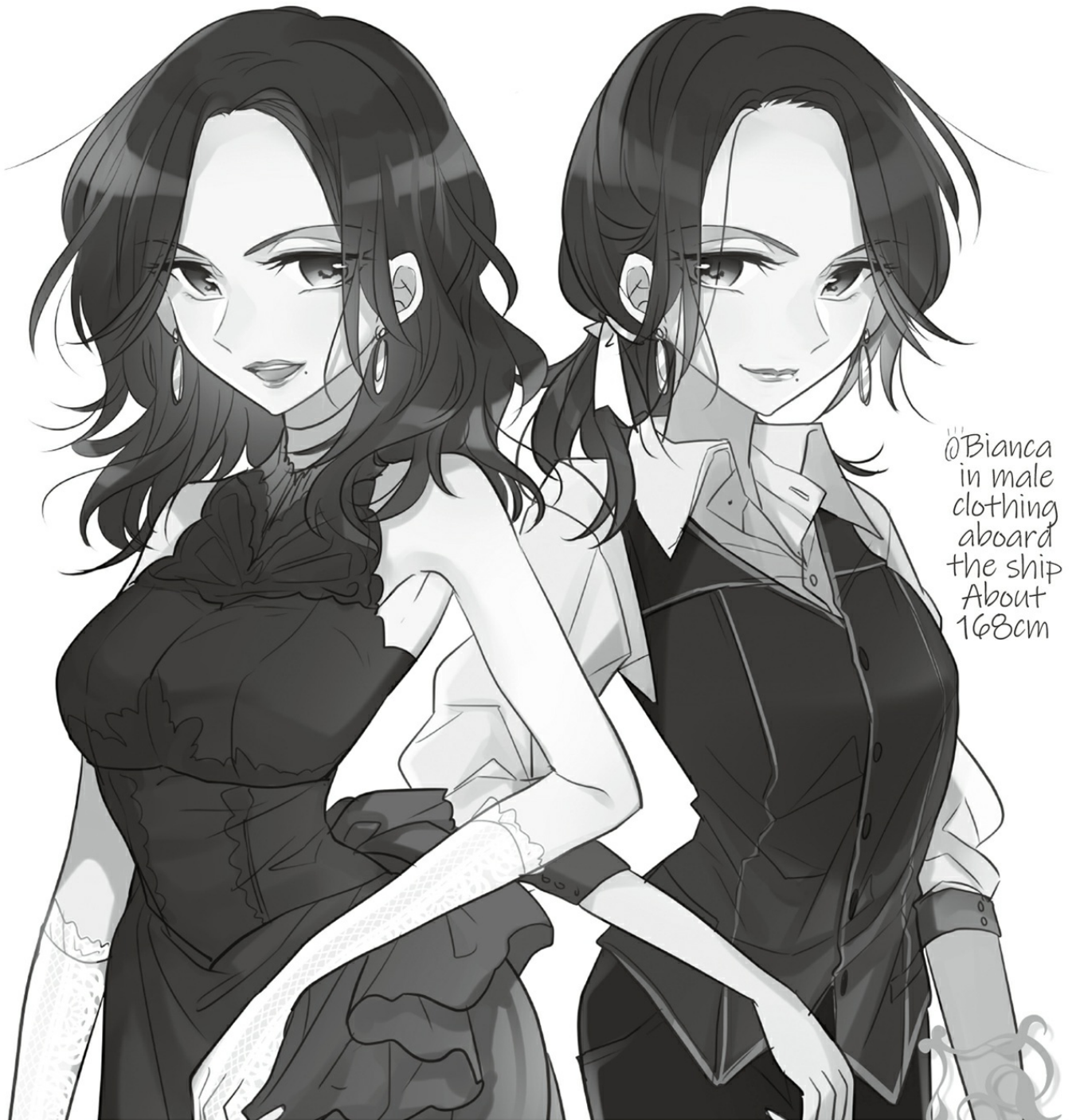
This happy dream will give me the power to fight on, no matter what hopeless nightmare or hellish reality awaits me when I awaken.

(Continued in the next volume)

Character Design



Bianca
von Diebolt



©Bianca
in male
clothing
aboard
the ship
About
168cm





Flora

Height
comparison

Rose
(on the ship)

Bianca

Flora von Gratz



Flora
About
155cm





**Wolf
Lucker**

Wolf
About
185cm





Rolf

@Lily
About
145cm?

Lily

@Rolf
About
155cm





Crow



@Crow
About
180cm

Cloaked
version





Nacht von Ersta

""
@Nacht
About
150cm?





Bonus Short Stories

The Reincarnated Princess Screws Up

Jingle.

Again today, the light, tinkling noise of a bell followed after me. When I turned around, a black cat narrowed its eyes and purred adorably.

I knelt down and held my hand out. The cat walked over without hesitation, so I picked him up.

“What’s this, Nero? You want a lot of love these days, don’t you?”

This wasn’t the first day that the black cat Nero had followed after me.

He tended to do what he wanted, and for a cat, he was remarkably good with strangers. Sometimes, he’d find a spot in my room, curl up, and stay there all day, but other days he’d prowl through the palace on his own chartered course.

So when he’d started tagging along with me every day, I’d found it strange. I appreciated the affection, but my schedule was packed with preparations for my imminent departure to Flanmer. Plus, some places I was going might not allow pets.

While I was worrying about what I was going to do with him, Nero’s ears twitched, and he nimbly jumped out of my arms.

“Nero?”

Without responding to the sound of my voice, Nero ran away. I chased after him at once, and I heard my guard knight’s startled cry from behind me. “Your Highness?!”

As I turned the corner, I collided with someone. “Aaaah?!”

“Careful.” Thankfully, the man caught me, so it didn’t hurt at all.

“Thank y—” I began to offer my gratitude, but I froze when I raised my head.

“I hope you’re not hurt, Your Highness.”

I saw myself reflected in his clear, black eyes. He was peering at me with a concerned expression on his face, and he looked just as perfectly handsome as ever.

“Sir Leon...”

I was glad we’d bumped into each other but embarrassed that he’d witnessed me in a state of unrest.

Apathetic to my jumbled emotions, the black cat rubbed his head against Sir Leonhart’s leg and purred without a care in the world.

Oh, so that’s it—Nero sensed that Sir Leonhart was nearby and ran to see him. He really does take after me...

“Does anywhere hurt?”

“N-No!” I shook my head and stumbled away from Sir Leonhart. “I’m fine. Thank you for catching me.” I then called out to my pet cat, who was coiling himself around Sir Leonhart’s leg. “Here, Nero. Let Sir Leon go about his day.”

However, Nero flicked his head away from me, refusing to obey.

Well, that’s not cute... Okay, that’s a lie, it’s super cute. Oh my God, he’s acting like a highly strung princess and I love it. Do it again, Nero.

After watching the exchange between Nero and me, Sir Leonhart smiled wryly and scooped Nero up in his arms. “Where are you headed?”

“Oh, ummm... The library.”

“I’ll escort you.” Sir Leonhart sent my guard knight a gesture with his eyes. This wasn’t Klaus—he was busy preparing for our journey, so someone else was guarding me today. The knight nodded and left.

“Let’s be on our way,” said Sir Leonhart as he began to escort me. Surely I can be forgiven for letting it go to my head.

On our way to the library, our conversation took many twists and turns, but we eventually landed on the topic of Nero. Sir Leonhart paused in thought for a moment after I mentioned Nero’s recent inexplicable clinginess.

“Perhaps he can tell that you’ll be departing soon.”

“Huh?” I asked.

“He’s going to miss you.” Sir Leonhart scratched Nero beneath his chin.

“Right?” he said to Nero. There was such a kind look in his eyes.

“It would be lovely if that’s really the reason,” I said, breaking into a smile.

Seeing that, Sir Leonhart stopped walking. I glanced up, and he stared right into my eyes. “Nero’s not the only one who’ll miss you.”

“Oh, I know,” I replied. “Chris is more sentimental than you’d think.”

Sir Leonhart’s eyes widened like he hadn’t expected that, and then he put on a bitter smile.

I did find his reaction strange, but I couldn’t find a chance to ask him about it.

Only after I’d crawled into bed that night did I realize that he might’ve been talking about himself.

Noooooooooo! Why did I go and break a rare romance flag?! You idiot!!!

The Reincarnated Princess and the Murmur

It was a gorgeous spring day, the kind of day where cats would curl up and snooze in sunny spots and guards would stifle yawns at their posts. Neither people nor animals were a match for drowsy spring days.

It’d happened to me before as well—it’s natural for everyone to doze off on days like this. Apparently though, I had forgotten to include my older brother in my definition of “everyone.”

“Chris?” I called. I stared in abject amazement at Christoph—my older brother, who’d only turned thirteen years old last month.

He was sitting on the sofa, sinking into its backrest, and he had intertwined his fingers together above his stomach. His eyes were closed. Seeing his posture, I imagined at first that he was deep in thought. However, the gentle sound of his breathing proved instead that he’d taken up residence in the land of dreams.

“Chris...?” I called again, unable to believe what I was seeing.

If there were a textbook titled *How to be the Perfect Prince*, I’d expect to find a chapter on how to emulate Chris... So I never thought I’d catch him nodding off!

I slid the book in my hands back onto the shelf and tiptoed over to Chris. He still didn’t wake up when I was right beside him, so I let myself take a good look at his sleeping face. I knew that this was frowned upon, but I couldn’t help myself.

Platinum-blond hair, as fine as silk thread, caught the sunlight that shone through the window and glinted faintly. His alabaster skin was enviably smooth. Together with his chiseled features, this made him look as beautiful as a Renaissance-era sculpture. At the same time, Chris looked younger than usual when he was asleep.

So cute, Chris... I felt my lips spreading into a smile. The face I was making must’ve been quite creepy, but I deserve to be forgiven for that—I was just so delighted to find my earnest older brother allowing himself a moment of relaxation.

“Tee hee.” I leaned over, resting my chin on my hands, which I’d placed on the sofa’s armrest, and stared up at Chris. It wasn’t the most well-mannered of poses, but nobody was here to see it anyway. My guard knight was stationed outside of the room because Chris had told him to leave—today was the first day in quite some time that Chris had no work to do, and he’d said that he wanted to take it easy with me. *I think I can get away with taking a break from acting like a princess just for now.*

Chris had probably planned to play chess together or chat about nothing with me, but I didn’t need any of that to enjoy myself. After all, he was the older brother I looked up to, and he was also like a dependable father figure to me, so just *being* together by itself was extremely pleasant.

I wasn’t getting bored of watching him sleep, and I was still staring, getting my fill, when a sigh-like puff of breath slipped through his pretty lips. “Mmm...” His long eyelashes twitched, and I realized that he was waking up. When his eyelids slowly raised, they revealed his clear, sapphire eyes, which sluggishly wandered

around the room, unfocused, until they landed on me.

“Rose?” he called, his voice sounding still half-asleep.

“Good morning, Chris,” I said, smiling. *So cute.*

Without taking his eyes away from my face, Chris reached out with a hand. The hand fumbled its way toward me, and I let it come. His right hand brushed against my cheek, and he calmly moved it up and down, as though checking that I was truly there. It tickled me a little, but I felt happy, so I didn’t stop him.

I have to say... I really am quite the brocon, I thought. Just then, Chris’s fingers stopped moving. *Is it over?* I wondered, looking up.

Chris looked at me and beamed. It was a broad, innocent smile.

I found myself frozen, my mouth hanging open. My brain couldn’t figure out what had just occurred.

Chris, however, stroked my hair naturally like nothing of note had happened. His touch was so gentle, as if he were patting a child. “My cute, cute treasure. You and Johan are what keep me going.”

“Huh?!” I gasped, my body writhing as though in agony, and I sank to the floor with a fierce blush on my cheeks.

That didn’t seem to affect Chris though... He simply drifted back off to dreamland.

Just a little, I resented how peaceful his face looked and his breath sounded as he nodded off once more. “Not fair...” I muttered, feeling like he’d beaten me.

Looks like my brocon phase won’t be ending any time soon...



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

[Newsletter](#)

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 5 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

[J-Novel Club Membership](#)

Copyright

The Reincarnated Princess Spends Another Day Skipping Story Routes:
Volume 4

by Bisu

Translated by Tom Harris Edited by C.D. Leeson

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

© Bisu/Frontier Works Inc.

Illustrations © Yukiko/Frontier Works Inc.

Cover illustration by Yukiko

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2018 by Frontier Works Inc.

This English edition is published by arrangement with Frontier Works Inc.,
Tokyo English translation © 2022 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved.

In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: July 2022